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**Self-assurance and Self-denial:
Repositioning the Individual in Contemporary
Chinese Society**

Abstract

This article argues that traditional Chinese society was characterized by a “part–whole structure” in which the value of an individual was measured by his value for society. In Europe, starting from the middle of the 15th century, a society that is characterized by a “many–one structure” developed. In such a society, an individual freely chooses with which organizations he or she associates. Man became seen as a creative actor in history, and personal freedom was understood to be the necessary requisite to act creatively. Along with the development of capitalism, contemporary Chinese society witnesses a shift from the traditional “part–whole structure” to the “many–one structure”. Integrating the opinion of personal informants and of online and other popular writers, this article investigates the changing position of the individual in contemporary Chinese society.

Keywords

Confucianism, capitalism, individualism, collectivism, social relations

1. Introduction

The question which type of relationship an individual has with society essentially is the question whether an individual is thought of as having ‘individual premises’ outside society, or, on the contrary, whether an individual only exists as such ‘within’ society, i.e., the question whether an individual is individually valued, or is measured merely in function of his value for society. In the following passage from *Red Sorghum* (Hong Gaoliang), Mo Yan describes community life and tradition in and around a liquor distillery in Gaomi Township in Shandong Province:

“What turns the sorghum of Northeast Gaomi Township into a sweet, aromatic wine that leaves the taste of honey in your mouth and produces no hangover? Mother told me once, making sure I understood that I was not to give away this family secret, for, if I did, not only would our family’s reputation suffer, but if our descendants ever decided to set up another distillery they’d have lost their unique advantage. Without exception, the craftsmen from our neck of the woods live by a simple rule: they would rather pass on their skills to their son’s wives than to their daughters. This established practice carries the same weight as the law in certain countries.”¹

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Mo Yan, *Hong gaoliang jiazou*. Red Sorghum, trans. Howard Goldblatt, Penguin Books, New York (NY) 1994, p. 85.

This description is illustrative for the Chinese traditional ordering of society that is centered around the nucleus family in which lies the primary value of an individual, and contrasts with the European tradition as it has developed starting from the middle of the 15th century. What makes the above quotation from *Red Sorghum* particularly interesting is the fact that it is exemplary for the literary movement of the mid-eighties of the 20th century in which a number of young writers who became known as ‘root-seeking authors’ attempted to give prominence to the significance of ‘culture’ in literature,² whereby they defined ‘culture’ as ‘national culture,’ opposed to the socio-political concepts that had dominated the literature of the Maoist era.³ In “The Roots of Literature,”⁴ Han Shaogong, another root-seeking author, thus stated: “Literature has roots. The roots of literature should be situated deep in the soil of national traditions and culture”. Likewise, Li Qingxi, one of the initiators of ‘root-seeking,’ in his essay “Root-seeking: A Return to Things Itself,”⁵ claimed that the initial primary intention of the root-seeking authors was to “seek out the spirit of national culture” so as to acquire the ability for the national spirit to save itself.⁶ For root-seeking authors, further, “Chinese literature should be established within a broad, deep ‘exploration and expression of culture,’ as there can only be a dialogue with ‘world literature’ when there is a deep exploration of this ancient land’s ‘rock formations of culture’.”⁷ Root-seeking authors thus both claim to return to the origins of Chinese culture as is, e.g., visible in the passage of *Red Sorghum* quoted above, and to reposition China within the world through ‘saving the national spirit’. This repositioning increasingly embraces such values as individualism which are typical for a ‘Western’ capitalist ordering of society, and that, for late 20th and early 21st century China, are part of its recent globalization.⁸ The tendency towards individualism in contemporary Chinese society shows to be an almost natural result of the growing liberalization and the growing wealth, not in the least on the economical level. This growing individualism is illustrative for the changing relation individual-society, and is, as such, quite remarkable for a society in which the value of an individual was traditionally measured in function of his value for the family and for the society.

It is the purpose of this article to investigate (1) the origins and development of the interpretation of an individual’s relation to society in Europe and in China, and, (2) in how far the view of the individual’s role in society as it is rooted in ancient Chinese culture still functions in the context of the particular form of capitalism with Chinese characteristics of contemporary Chinese society. The growing individualism and the changing relation individual-society as contrasted to the dependent relation individual-society that characterized Chinese feudal society and the Maoist era, will be addressed from a socio-psychological perspective. In doing so, this investigation includes the individual opinion of personal informants and Chinese online authors.

2. Seeking for the roots of the traditional Chinese view of the individual and his relation to society

As a result of the limited possibilities for economic growth that characterize an agrarian economy combined with a natural increase in population, Chinese society witnessed a major economical and political crisis in those periods of its history known as the Spring-and-Autumn (722–481 BCE) and the Warring States (481–221 BCE) Periods. These periods also mark the beginnings of ‘philosophy’ in China, as a variety of philosophers tried to give an analysis of

and provide a solution for this political and economical crisis.⁹ Of the different philosophies that were formulated, Confucianism aimed at restoring good order in society by allocating to the individual his proper place and prescribing appropriate behavior.¹⁰ This attitude, as is also evident from the passage of Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* quoted in the introduction to this article, helps to explain why Confucianism, characterized as a value system that places constraint on the expression of individual desires and that sponsors group sharing of limited resources, became the state doctrine in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), and remained the predominant philosophy for ordering the state in the centuries to come.¹¹ Given the size of its population in comparison to the available agricultural land, China remained an agrarian society in which subsistence level living was the lot of most of its people. Confronted with this constant threat of economic shortage, the nucleus family was the only insurance against the interests of other nucleus families and against the state at large. As such, it was (and still is) the first and very often the only social support for an individual. Each nucleus family therefore tends to stick to managing its own business only.¹²

As the Confucian state leaves welfare for the nucleus family to manage, and sees concentration of people's loyalty on the family as a means to stabilize the state at large,¹³ civil law that protects an individual's or a group's interest against the interest of another individual or group within society was not developed. Rather, by using penal law, people's behavior was kept within the

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Hong Zicheng, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*. (English translation of *Zhongguo Dangdai Wenxueshi*. Beijing University Press, Beijing, by Michael W. Day), Brill, Leiden 2007, p. 383.

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Hong Z., *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, p. 292.

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Published in *Zuojia*, No.6, 1985. This text was later seen as the 'manifesto' of 'root-seeking literature'.

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Published in *Literary Reviews*, No. 4, 1988.

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See Hong Z., *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, p. 368.

7

Hong Z., *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, p. 367.

8

There are many definitions for 'individualism,' all related to the angle from which one discusses the topic. Most of them are western definitions. Therefore, the ambiguity of the term makes it a difficult one to use especially in comparative cultural studies. The definition of individualism we use in this paper is the following: "a cultural orientation in which independence, autonomy and self-reliance take priority over group allegiances." This

in contrast to collectivist societies in which interdependence, cooperation and social harmony take priority over personal goals. See Sharon S. Brehm, Saul Kassin and Steven Fein (eds), *Social Psychology*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston (MA) / New York (NY) 2005, p. 238.

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See Wolfgang Bauer, *Geschichte der chinesischen Philosophie*, Verlag C. H. Beck, München 2006, p. 37.

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See Anne Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, Seuil, Paris 1997, pp. 34–35.

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See Michael H. Bond and Kwang-kuo Hwang, "The Social Psychology of Chinese people", in: Michael H. Bond (ed.), *The Psychology of the Chinese People*, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong 1986, p. 215; Gordon S. Redding, *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin and New York 1993, pp. 43–44.

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See on this Myron L. Cohen, *House United, House Divided: The Chinese Family in Taiwan*, Columbia University Press, New York (NY) 1976, p. 11.

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G. S. Redding, *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*, p. 46.

limits allocated to them by the ruling class.¹⁴ This also encouraged such Confucian practices as filial piety, an attitude that was further strengthened by the traditional ancestor worship that has become identified with Confucianism. By definition, ancestor worship takes the kinship group as paradigm of social order. Social relations that exist between the living are hereby lifted beyond this world, into the realm of the deceased who have the potential to interfere in this world.¹⁵ The Confucian state ideology thus is one of an ultimate non-interference of state organizations, whereby the social distinctions are philosophized in terms of primary (the ruling elite of the *shi* class and the farmers (*nong*)) and secondary (artisans (*gong*) and merchants (*shang*)) professions, and in which maintenance of order is organized through rules of moral conduct.¹⁶

The status of the *shi* that is derived from his Confucian education, combined with the virtue associated with farming by these very *shi*, made sure that the Confucian state did not provide the merchants with institutions to facilitate the effective use of money in productive enterprise.¹⁷ Capital, instead, either went into the purchase of more land, or in such unproductive assets as the buying of degrees, titles and offices, and into the day-to-day management of the administration.¹⁸ Also land accumulation was constrained by the rules of succession, stipulating the division of landed property among the sons of the family.¹⁹ Moreover, the *shi*, as ruling class, controlled entry into their ranks through the Confucian education system. This ossified the social stratification for centuries to come, to the extent that, starting from the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368), even merchants who, starting from the Song Dynasty (960–1271), had gained economical power and prestige, began to trade their wealth for a position in the Confucian bureaucracy and encouraged their sons to train for the imperial examinations.²⁰ The state thus maintained order in the rivalry between the different nucleus families, by determining who can become part of the leading figures of the state. This pacified state is seen as part of a natural cosmic order, symbolized in the ‘decree of heaven’ (*tianming*), with which humans cannot interfere.

The social networks that function within the Chinese Confucian society are the natural outcome of this political and economical model. Chad Hansen describes Chinese society as characterized by a ‘part–whole structure,’ whereby the ‘parts’ are the individuals, and the ‘whole’ is a certain social relationship this individual has with a greater construct, be it the family in narrow sense, the family in larger sense, or society as a whole.²¹ In a part–whole structure, each part is, by definition, part of something else. That ‘something else’ may, in its turn, be part of something still bigger. Moreover, each primary part can simultaneously be part of different constructs. In such a structure, therefore, the relation of the part to the whole is not a single line of relationship, but a whole bundle of lines. Each of these lines represents a specific social relationship, and with each of these lines, a separate behavioral code is connected.²² One of the outcomes of this process of living, as it were, in a web, is that the web becomes part of the person. The self is embedded in relationships, inextricable from it, and not thought of as independent of such attachments.²³

The late Fei Xiaotong (1910–2005) called this type of social model a “differential mode of association” (*chaxugeju*). To illustrate this kind of relationship, he uses the metaphor of the concentric circles that appear when throwing a rock into the water.²⁴ Each individual is at the center of the circles produced by his or her own social influence. Everyone’s circles are interrelated, and one touches different circles at different times and places. In such a model, each interference of one’s own circles with those of another individual represents a different kind of relationship. To each interference, a specific moral behavior

is attached. Therefore, the Chinese pattern of social organization embraces no ethical concepts that transcend specific types of human relationships.²⁵ Each relation of an individual with another individual or group is determined by the rules of conduct that are proper to this specific relation or *guanxi*.²⁶

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See on this John Wu, “The Status of the Individual in the Political and Legal Traditions of Old and New China”, in: Charles A. Moore (ed.), *The Chinese Mind. Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture*, East-West Center Press, Honolulu (HI) 1967, pp. 344–345. Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy. Political Thinking for an East Asian Context*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) and Oxford 2006, p. 15 remarks that, “While modern East Asian countries have incorporated “individualistic” conceptions of property rights to a certain extent, they still tend, in both law and morality, to regard property as an asset of the whole family, including elderly parents.”

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Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London 1985, p. 23: “The fact that these role relationships span the divide between the world of the living and the numinous world of the dead may indeed enormously reinforce the sense of the ‘ontic’ reality of role and status and of the order in which they are embedded. Since the kinship roles are inevitably and ‘naturally’ hierarchic, based as they are on ascriptive biological differences between the old and the young and the male and the female (in a patriarchal family), hierarchy and role on this level are an integral aspect of the ultimate fame of things, although I must point out that by its very nature kinship hierarchy is not fixed and unchangeable. Sons become fathers; daughters become mothers and mothers-in-law; and all become ancestors. There certainly remains room here for the thought that an individual is more than the sum of the roles he plays without in any way diminishing the centrality of the imperative to play one’s role correctly.”

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On primary and secondary professions: see on this Derk Bodde, “The Idea of Social Classes in Han and Pre-Han China”, in: Wilt L. Idema and Erik Zürcher (eds.), *Thought and Law in Qin and Han China. Studies Dedicated to Anthony Hulswé on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, Brill, Leiden 1990, p. 33.

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G. S. Redding, *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*, p. 122 enumerates such institutions as institutions for pooling capital; legal, financial, commercial institutions that can shift capital from commerce to industry, while protecting liquidity; a reliable currency; large-scale fairs in the interior of the country which would

have facilitated the exchange of ideas. On the consciousness of the merchants of the necessity to reinvest capital: see Giovanni Arrighi, “The Rise of East Asia: World Systemic and Regional Aspects”, *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 16/7 (1996), pp. 6–44.

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On the proverbial corruption that raged in such a system, boosting poor government salaries been seen as simply oiling the wheels or rampant corruption going hand-in-hand with extensive spiritual decay: see Richard L. A. Sterba, “Clandestine Management in the Imperial Chinese Bureaucracy”, *Academy of Management Review* 3.1 (1978), pp. 69–78.

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See Lin Nan, “Chinese Family Structure and Chinese Society”, *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology* 65 (1989), pp. 382–399.

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See Lin Nan, “Emerging Chinese Capitalism and its Theoretical and Global Significance”, in Kwok B. Chan, Tak-Sing Cheung, and Agnes S. M. Ku (eds.), *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies. Vol. 3. Chinese Capitalisms*, Brill, Leiden 2007, p. 42.

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Chad Hansen, “Individualism in Chinese Thought”, in: Donald J. Munro (ed.), *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist Values*. Center for Chinese Studies. The University of Michigan, 1985.

22

A. Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, p. 37: “Il en résulte une vision du monde, non pas comme un ensemble d’entités discrètes et indépendantes dont chacune constitue en elle-même une essence, mais comme un réseau continu de relations entre le tout et les parties, sans que l’un transcende les autres.”

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See G. S. Redding, *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*, p. 62.

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Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil. The Foundations of Chinese Society*, University of California Press, Berkeley (CA) 1992, pp. 62–63.

25

See Fei X., *From the Soil*, p. 74.

26

See D. A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy*, p. 267. In Chinese philosophy, it especially



In economical perspective, each ‘*guanxi*’ relation begins with the problem of growing and protecting family resources.²⁷ An individual’s actions serve to enrich his nucleus family, thus assisting in an increase of the family’s status in society.²⁸ Each family accumulates riches for itself, to the disfavor of another family, and each individual contribution to this family enrichment becomes an aspect of family achievement.²⁹ This phenomenon of family enrichment at the expense of other families has been labeled “magnified selfishness”.³⁰ To achieve this aim, the individual has to use a network of social relations in which he has to behave responsibly and reliably. In this context, the Chinese form of ‘trust’ works on the basis of personal reputation, and is not the kind of ‘trust’ that is regulated in juridical codes.³¹

An individual’s behavior, however, is not simply a function of his social roles. Individuals possess a potential moral autonomy. When they develop this potentiality, they can increase their value in society. This is because, in their emphasis on self-cultivation, the Confucians have in mind a transformation of the person as a whole. Kwong-loi Shun differentiates four layers for an individual’s relation with society: (1) he knows social distinction, (2) he has to observe traditional norms that govern people’s behavior by virtue of social position (it is through participating in this social order and letting oneself be shaped by it that one becomes fully human), (3) his human relations are directed toward other human beings who are equally formed by the same social order, and (4) his cultivated character will have a transformative effect on other human beings. One’s own self-cultivation thus will have a transformative effect on other things, and such effect is itself a measure of one’s progress in self-cultivation. Society thus both is the inspiration and the aim of an individual’s existence.³² As a consequence, the value of an individual is measured by his value for society, and the way to go beyond oneself and reach out to the world is “to extend oneself circle by circle”.³³

All this explains why Chinese society should rather be characterized as holistic, not as individualistic. Chinese political actors will therefore tend to construct holistic or non-individuating models of society and social process.³⁴ In a holistic society, the own relation to society naturally also involves someone else’s relation to society. In such a situation, society at large and the state cannot be conceived of as neutral (universal) constructs from which an individual derives universal rights that he can legitimately claim.

Against this background, the way things were traditionally “understood” in China therefore began with the idea of a cosmic order. However, whereas the search for a cosmic order in the West proceeded via empirical research, in the Chinese context, “understanding” meant understanding where in a man-made scheme something fits. This scheme was founded on the concept that things belong to groups of relations (*guanxi*).³⁵ Knowledge in the Chinese tradition therefore was essentially conceived to be skill-knowledge: “knowing (how) to.” As Anne Cheng puts it:

“Plutôt qu’un “savoir quoi” (c’est-à-dire une connaissance propositionnelle qui aurait pour contenu idéal la vérité), la connaissance – conçue comme ce qui, sans en être encore, tend vers l’action – est avant tout un “savoir comment”: comment faire des distinctions afin de diriger sa vie et aménager l’espace social et cosmique à bon escient. Il ne s’agit donc pas d’une connaissance qui appréhende intellectuellement le sens d’une proposition, mais qui intègre le donné d’une chose ou d’une situation.”³⁶

In the same way as the Chinese economical and social model is a model aimed at the *status quo*, also the scientific model therefore spirals around a *status quo*.

3. Europe and the rise of capitalism

Around the same time as this happened in China, also in Greece, Aristotle (384–322 BCE), as Plato (428–348 BCE) had done before him, dealt with the problem of ‘knowledge’. Aristotle defined ‘*sophia*’ as ‘*theoria*’. The concept of ‘theoretical knowledge’ was hereby opposed to ‘practical knowledge,’ i.e., knowledge relating to human (social) behavior. Aristotle favored theoretical knowledge, however, for the sake of practice: it is the most useful kind of knowledge for practical aims, as this kind of knowledge requires an absolute abstraction of the practical aim.³⁷ As this is the case in Chinese philosophy, also Greek ‘*sophia*’ thus finds its aim ‘in’ the world; in Platonean and Aris-

were the Confucianists, with their emphasis on strict social division, who stressed these different grades of relationship, and the different kinds of moral behavior that are appropriate to it. The Mohist view, centered on the concept of ‘*jian’ ai*’ (universal love) does not fundamentally differ from this view of an individual’s position in society. Mohist philosophy has been defined as an a-moral Confucianism. Also Daoist philosophy shows to be indebted to this part–whole concept. The *Daodejing*, e.g., explains that ‘*dao*’ gives rise to one, one to two, two to three, and three to the ten thousand things. In reverse order, this means that the ten thousand things, the parts, are part of the three, the two, the one, and, eventually, the ultimate whole that is ‘*dao*’. When the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi urges us to return to the ‘natural state,’ he does not intend that we should focus on human individual subjectivity. Rather, the urge to return to the ‘natural state’ reflects the awareness that the individual is only part of the ‘whole,’ and is inspired by the fact that human beings, in their behavior, are shaped by the social environment in which they behave. See Ch. Hansen, “Individualism in Chinese Thought”, p. 52.

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G. S. Redding, *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*, p. 67.

28

G. S. Redding, *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*, p. 3, remarks that the overseas Chinese have developed one particular form of organization – the family business – and kept to it. It remains in essence a family fortress, and at the same time an instrument for the accumulation of wealth by a very specific set of people.

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See Richard W. Wilson and Anne W. Pusey, “Achievement Motivation and Small Business Relationship Patterns in Chinese Society”, in: Sidney L. Greenblatt, Richard W. Wilson, and Amy A. Wilson (eds.), *Social Interaction in Chinese Society*, Praeger, New York (NY) 1982, p. 199.

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Lin Yutang (1936) *My Country, My People*, Heinemann, Hong Kong 1936, p. 178.

31

G. S. Redding, *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*, pp. 136–13: “In China, law was never really available as a practical recourse for the merchant, and without such a backing, all relationships remained personalistic. This in turn produced a barrier to the scale of enterprise, as important transactions could only be made face-to-face.” See in this respect also the quotation of Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum* in the introduction to this article.

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Kwong-Loi Shun, “Conception of the Person in Early Confucian Thought”, in: Kwong-Loi Shun and David B. Wong (eds.), *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, pp. 190–193. See also B. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, p. 113.

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Fei X., *From the Soil*, p. 67.

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See Ch. Hansen, “Individualism in Chinese Thought”, p. 48.

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See Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China. Vol. 2. History of Scientific Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1956, p. 324.

36

A. Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, p. 34.

37

See Cecil M. Bowra, *The Greek Experience*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1958, p. 86. On the rise of creative thinkers in the civilizations of the ancient Near East, Greece, India, and China in the course of the 1st millennium BC, see Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, Artemis Verlag, Zürich 1949.

totelian philosophy, wisdom is concerned with the practical lives of humans in society.³⁸

In Europe, a first fundamental shift was brought about by Augustinus (354–430). Taking the birth of Christ as focal point of history – Christ having died for the sins of human beings, Augustinus replaced the cyclical interpretation of time that characterized Greek antiquity, with a linear time model with three time periods: the period from Adam to Moses; the period from Moses to the birth of Christ; and the period from Christ to the end of the world. The resurrection of Christ is the endpoint of this linear interpretation of time. By consequence, life on earth is untrue; humans are alienated from themselves and will only return to themselves in the transcendent empire of God.³⁹ Another important consequence of Augustinus's view of history, apart from rendering life on earth without value, is its universalistic character: all human beings suffer the same lot. All human beings are created by God, and they thus all have the potential and the possibility to turn to the right religious belief. When the salvation of man is part of a divine plan, then all humans are summoned to take part in this divine plan and should, hence, become part of the ecclesiastical community.⁴⁰ Profane life is not meaningful *an sich*, but is only meaningful in its transcendental function.⁴¹

Starting from the middle of the 15th century, the shift from scholastic thinking to Humanism and Renaissance set in: the development of physical sciences revealed that both time and space are endless, and thus challenged the Augustinian view. This prepared the way for the thinking of the period of Enlightenment, with a renewed emphasis on the physical and sensual world.⁴² One important consequence of this was that man was seen as a creative actor in history. Personal freedom was understood to be a universal value, and the necessary requisite for man to act creatively.⁴³ Such freedom needs to be guaranteed legally.⁴⁴ Along with the combined transfigurations of the Renaissance and the scientific revolution came the Reformation and the rise of capitalism. Max Weber argues that, whereas Confucianism wants to preserve the *status quo*, therefore concentrating the individual's attention to the family and regulating his social behavior by means of a moral code, Protestantism advocated that trust in men could endanger the soul, and provided the individual with a direct access to God.⁴⁵ "A superior community of faith and a common ethical way of life were set against the community of blood relationships, and even against the family itself".⁴⁶ The restraint of the family bonds cast off, the individual could strive for personal wealth.

In contradistinction to the part–whole relationship that characterizes Chinese society, capitalist and individualist European society is characterized by a 'many–one relationship,' whereby the 'many' are the separate individuals, and the 'one' is the society.⁴⁷ Fei Xiaotong calls this type of social structure an "organizational mode of association" (*tuantigeju*).⁴⁸ In a many–one relationship, each individual has the same type of relation to the one. In this sense, the individuals are interchangeable. The social consequence of such a relationship for the individual is that, as it is not his relationship to the one that constitutes his uniqueness, his uniqueness lies in his individualistic self. In other words, a many–one relationship is characteristic of an individualistic society. As is obvious from the above, this accentuation of the individual is a rather recent development.⁴⁹

In modern Western societies, people attach themselves to preexisting organizations, and then, using that organizational structure, establish personal relationships with other individuals who are equally member of that same structure, or with individuals who are no member of that specific organization. All personal relations are determined by who is in and who is not in a certain organizational structure. That is to say, the fundamental concept of morality is, in the West,

built on the relationship between the organization and the individual. An individual who joins an organization always keeps his individual rights. Each member's relation to that organization is the same, if not, these differences are agreed on before becoming member.⁵⁰ In a context in which an individual's social behavior is self-contained and motivated by self-interest, and in which individuals are mutually interchangeable, individuals can legitimately claim their individual rights in neutral courts that judge within the framework of laws issued by a neutral state. Whereas in traditional China, the boundary between private and public has never been clear, the modern European state is an organization that creates distinct boundaries between the public and the private.⁵¹

4. Capitalism with Chinese characteristics: growing towards an individualistic society

Although the Far East, between AD 500 and AD 1500 was a “world economy” on itself,⁵² the Chinese interest for the outside world remained limited.

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See Bart Dessein, “Climbing a Tree to Catch Fish: Some Reflections on Plato, Aristotle, and China”, in: Johannes Bronkhorst (ed.), *La Rationalité en Asie / Rationality in Asia*, Etudes de Lettres, Lausanne 2001, pp. 101–102.

39

See Thomas Göller and Achim Mittag, *Geschichtsdenken in Europa und China. Selbstdedeutung und Deutung des Fremden in historischen Kontexten*, Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin 2008, pp. 25–26.

40

See Th. Göller and A. Mittag, *Geschichtsdenken in Europa und China*, p. 28, who comment on Augustinus's view of history in the following way: “In und mit der Geschichte ist nicht mehr bloss die Geschichte als *historia gentium*, als Stammes-, Volks- oder Sippen-geschichte, sondern die Geschichte als Einheit des gesamten Menschengeschlechts, als *totum genus humanum*, thematisch.”

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See Th. Göller and A. Mittag, *Geschichtsdenken in Europa und China*, p. 31.

42

For reflections on the relation between the physical and the divine in this early period of ‘scientific thinking’: see Th. Göller and A. Mittag, *Geschichtsdenken in Europa und China*, p. 38.

43

See Ernst Casirer, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*. Studien der Bibliothek Warburg Herausgegeben von Fritz Saxl. B. G. Teubner, Leipzig and Berlin 1927, p. 46.

44

See Otfried Höffe, “Gibt es in der Geschichte einen Rechtsfortschritt”, in: *Den Staat braucht selbst ein Volk von Teufeln*, Reclam, Stuttgart

1988, pp. 125–149. For the origins of this idea with Immanuel Kant: see Th. Göller and A. Mittag, *Geschichtsdenken in Europa und China*, pp. 56–57.

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Max Weber, *The Religion of China*, The Free Press, Glencoe 1954, p. 241.

46

G. S. Redding, *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*, p. 139. G. S. Redding, *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*, p. 62: “The lack of an ultimate authority, such as supra-mundane God, leaves the individual without grounds for supporting as a separate person a sacred “cause” or a universally applicable principle, such as Christian charity, and replaces them with piety towards specific people, especially those in close related proximity.”

47

See Ch. Hansen, “Individualism in Chinese Thought”.

48

Fei X., *From the Soil*, p. 62.

49

Steven Lukes, *Individualism*, Harper and Row, New York (NY) 1973, p. 1: “‘Individualism’, like ‘socialism’ and ‘communism’, is a nineteenth-century word.”

50

See Fei X., *From the Soil*, pp. 61–62.

51

See Tu Weiming, *Confucian Ethics Today. The Singapore Challenge*, Federal Publications, Singapore 1984, p. 5.

52

Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism 15th to 18th Century. Vol. III: The Perspective of the World*, Collins, London 1984, p. 397.

The Confucian state had identified the limits of the ‘Chinese’ world, and its people were not encouraged to go beyond these limits.⁵³ One rare exception were the beginning years of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), when, under the Yongle Emperor, Zheng He (1371–1433) set off on his famous maritime expeditions, eventually bringing him to the East coast of Africa. After Zheng He, however, such expeditions were never again organized. In the years following 1433, the year in which Zheng He returned to China from his seventh and last journey, the literati at the imperial court complained about the huge cost of the expeditions and urged their immediate suspension. A ban on all overseas maritime activities was promulgated, as well as restrictions concerning the construction of ships. “China reverted to the closed and controlled state that had existed prior to the reign of the Yongle Emperor,” and “within a hundred years, the golden era of ocean-going expeditions had been virtually forgotten, and the hey-day of Chinese nautical technology had become, at most, a distant memory”.⁵⁴

According to Max Weber, in a holistic world order in which Confucianism – which he characterizes as “Rationalismus der Weltanpassung” – was blended with the Daoist cosmic principles, the rise of “a rational economy and technology of modern occidental character was simply out of the question”.⁵⁵ Therefore, when in 1978 Deng Xiaoping declared that getting rich is glorious, hereby urging Chinese citizens to take responsibility for their own welfare, this, at first sight, may appear as a Copernican transformation indeed. During China’s feudal period and its authoritarian society guided by Confucian ethics in which filial piety, hierarchy, loyalty, and bureaucracy were key terms, the ability to influence the course of one’s own life had been virtually non-existent for the overwhelming majority of the people. Also during the Maoist years, self-negation in the form of conformity to the masses was the dominant social code. In these years, through the ‘iron rice bowl’ social security system as structured by the work unit (*danwei*), the Party took care of food, housing, medical care, childcare, schools for employee’s children, stable – although often uninspiring – jobs and a secured old day.⁵⁶ Even the personal file (*dang’an*) necessary for whatever major changes in one’s life such as moving and marrying, was in the hands of Party superiors. The *danwei* system thus forced individuals into an unconditional commitment to the Party in return for guaranteed social security. Without doubt, this situation did not inspire people to try to act upon their own individual beliefs and dreams. As Julia Kwong states, “Even though some might have had second thoughts in private, external pressure on [their] commitment was strong enough to make [people] publicly conform”.⁵⁷

At second sight, however, a tendency towards a greater ‘individuation’ of society set in already in imperial China. After the abortive social innovations, in respect to individual and social emancipation, starting in the Song Dynasty, in particular one moment that has been of crucial importance for the development of a more individualistic society can be discerned: After the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), and especially in the 1890s, the traditional Chinese context changed dramatically. Those gentry who, given the collapse of the Qing state, had no hopes of official employment would be separating family from state in order to give ultimate devotion to family (and perhaps more attention to local communities), while those who did become officials would be pursuing their ambitions by displaying their ultimate loyalty to the state, in this way separating family from state as well.⁵⁸ These developments stand in stark contrast to traditional society in which the private realm was highly regarded as mere residual category, left over after the public sphere

was defined. In this sense, although an actual development toward the rise of capitalism and individualism did not happen in Confucianist China,⁵⁹ Deng's appeal to 'become prosperous' can be interpreted as connecting to the social developments that characterized the final decades of the Qing Dynasty, and as, as such, implying a re-appraisal of the individual. This tendency towards a more individual-oriented society was enforced through the fact that the reform movement that started at the end of the 70s of the 20th century, has made China increasingly become part of a world economy and politics that are arranged and governed through international organizations that are structured according to the many-one dichotomy, i.e., organizations that are peculiar for an individualistic, capitalist ordering of society.

The claim that, at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, China has become a capitalist country is sustained by the fact that China has installed a number of institutions that serve to sustain production and accumulation of capital, such as banks, stock exchanges, and, not unimportantly, a supportive state. However, capitalism in China has two peculiar characteristics: (1) the state behaves as a capitalist institution in its own right, and (2) social relations (*guanxi*) embed the economic activities.⁶⁰

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See on this: Lin N., "Emerging Chinese Capitalism and its Theoretical and Global Significance", p. 42.

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Mathieu Torck, *Avoiding the Dire Straits: An Inquiry into Food Provisions and Scurvy in the Maritime and Military History of China and Wider East Asia*, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2009, p. 155. For some reflections on early exceptions on China's seclusiveness: See Mathieu Torck, "China's Visions of the Pacific in History: The Unimaginable and Immeasurable", in: Roderick Ptak and Angela Schottenhammer (eds.), *East Asian Maritime History. Vol. 2: Maritime Space in Traditional Chinese Sources, Tang through Qing Dynasties (c.700–1911)*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 2006, pp. 148–151.

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M. Weber, *The Religion of China*, pp. 152–154. This is in line with the findings of Robert N. Bellah, *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia*, The Free Press, New York (NY) 1965, who, investigating the relation between Asian religions and economic progress, noted that the focus on family cult of Confucianism, its stress on social conformity, and its absence of a transcendent goal are instrumental for perpetuating the *status quo* and provide no leverage for change. Also the other two major Chinese philosophies, Daoism and Buddhism, discount the practical world as a sphere for valid endeavor, thus retarding social change and material progress.

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The 'iron rice bowl' (*tie fanwan*) is a Chinese term used in the period '50–'80 to refer to an occupation with guaranteed job security, as well as steady income and social welfare ben-

efits. Traditionally, people considered to have 'iron rice bowls' include military personnel, civil servants, as well as employees of various state run enterprises through the mechanism of the work unit (*danwei*). Since during the communist period all possible 'enterprises' such as schools, factories, hospitals, government agencies and the like were state-owned, all employees benefited from this system. For more on the *danwei*, see Graham Hutchings, *Modern China. A Companion to a Rising Power*, Penguin Group, Harmondsworth 2000, p. 97; Lü, Xiaobo and Elizabeth J. Perry, *Danwei: the Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective*, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk (NY) and London 1997.

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Julia Kwong, "Ideological Crisis among China's Youths: Values and Official Ideology", *The British Journal of Sociology* 45(2) (1994), p. 252.

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See on this Peter Zarrow, "The Origins of Modern Chinese Concepts of Privacy: Notes on Social Structure and Moral Discourse", in: Bonnie S. McDougall and Anders Hansson (eds.), *Chinese Concepts of Privacy*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 2002.

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Joseph Needham, *Within the Four Seas. The Dialogue of East and West*, George Allen and Unwin, London 1969, p. 117; Joseph Needham, *La tradition scientifique chinoise*, Hermann, Paris 1974, pp. 280–281.

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See Lin N., "Emerging Chinese Capitalism and its Theoretical and Global Significance", p. 13.

The Chinese individual of the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century thus finds himself in a transformative era, an era of a gradual development from a society organized according to a part–whole structure, to a society organized according to a one–many structure, bringing economical and social insecurity and uncertainty, combined with the gradual abolishment of the guaranteed all-encompassing social security system of the previous period. It hereby is the traditional focus on accumulation of family wealth, referred to above, that explains why Chinese capitalism – especially in the beginning period and with regard to ‘Chinese capitalism’ among the overseas Chinese – rests on a form of social organization that is legitimated through kinship principles. Gradually, Chinese capitalism has developed into a stricter ‘individualistic’ tendency. This evolution has been strengthened by the birth regulation policy that was introduced at the end of the 1970s. Because of this policy, the family became a much smaller in-group, thus reducing the number of relatives one can rely on for social assistance. On the one hand, there are less voices to take into account for the young, an evolution stimulated by the fact that the only child often lives and works far away from its parents. On the other hand, because there are less children to count on, ‘modern’ parents need their child(ren) even more for securing their old day, but they are aware of the responsibility this puts on their child(ren)’s shoulders and, as a consequence, try to act more independently themselves.

According to Geert Hofstede, there is a causal relationship from wealth – the main aim of capitalism – towards individualism, or to use his words, “poverty makes people depend on the support of their in-groups, but when a country’s wealth increases, its citizens get access to resources that allow them to “do their own thing”.⁶¹ Growing autonomy, independence and self-reliance indeed are determining factors for measuring the level of individualism in society. The first exponent of growing individualism in a context of liberalization is consequently an individual’s economical activity.

When, from the 1980s on, becoming rich in any possible way provided a new sense of individual freedom and individual rights, it also implied a heavy burden disguised as a social duty. Individual wealth accumulation would contribute to a strong, healthy and independent Chinese nation, and this certainly was what every Chinese citizen longed for after the disastrous experience of the Maoist years. However, although it is generally accepted that this newly acquired ‘freedom’ was warmly welcomed, especially by the Chinese youth, most Chinese could not possibly foresee what the impact of the new liberal course on the welfare system and their feelings of social and general security would be. The consequences on grassroots level of the new economic policies were only experienced later, when millions of people got laid-off without any compensation, health insurance became an unaffordable private issue, and abuse by those in power (corruption) flourished.⁶² In addition, personal wealth instead of enriching the nucleus family became a new important criterion for social status and thus for self-assurance. This in turn created additional pressure on the individual.

To deal with the new problems of financial and social insecurity, the Chinese seem somehow to have efficiently adapted their lifestyles and personal values according to the capitalist ideal of getting rich. Care for relatives, far-away family members and close neighbors became less important. Instead, pragmatic self-preservation became imperative for surviving. As a middle-school student in the *Beijing Qingnian Bao*, a Chinese newspaper for youths, observed: “Nowadays, everyone – from the state to the individual – talks about

pragmatism. It's the most basic and natural thing. First and foremost, you have to look out for yourself; only then can you think about helping other people."⁶³ Besides, as often promoted on official websites and in official articles, traditional 'survival strategies' such as 'knowing (and accepting) fate' (*zhi tianming*) and 'pretended muddleheadedness' (as in the saying 'It is difficult to be muddled' – *nande hutu*) to help dealing with stress and discontent, encourage people to entirely focus on their own objectives and future, and not to bother too much about social changes.⁶⁴ These strategies, or rather attitudes, seem to recall the Confucian virtue of self-cultivation referred to above, and as such support a feeling of (moral) autonomy and individual responsibility. In reality however, they indirectly discourage people to publicly address their anxieties, but rather encourage them to deal with these problems in their own inner sphere (*jingjie*). This is in no sense different from the oppression of emotions, doubts and anxieties during the feudal and Maoist periods. In fact, some kind of self-abnegation (self-transcendence) is still promoted, be it not so much as a way to efface oneself (the part) in favor of society (the whole), but rather as an individualistic tool for self-preservation.

Apart from a pragmatic, individualistic attitude towards self-preservation, modern society also brings about more criticism and feelings of self-reliance. Examples are the popular books about changing one's destiny (*gaibian mingyun*), which offer a counterweight to popular sayings such as 'knowing (and accepting) fate'.⁶⁵ This is the first sign of a fairly new phenomenon: reflec-

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Geert Hofstede gives the example of the storyteller in the village that is replaced by TV, first one per village, after a while everyone had his own TV. The caravan through the desert is replaced by a number of buses, and these by a larger number of cars, until each adult member of a family drives his own car. These examples are definitely applicable to Chinese society, where private TV's and cars were probably – together with a family's own refrigerator – the first material signs of growing individualism. See Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations across Nations*, Foreign Language Education Press, Shanghai 2008, p. 253.

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See J. Kwong, "Ideological Crisis among China's Youths: Values and Official Ideology", p. 251: "The most efficient way to make money was not necessarily through knowledge, innovativeness, and diligence. The contract system, private enterprise, and a free market were introduced with few rules to guide behavior and limit transgressions. [...] Being rich was not necessarily achieved through fair means."

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See Jeremy R. Barmé, *In the Red*, Columbia University Press, New York (NY) 1999, p. 111. The opinion was found in the *Beijing Qingnian Bao* of 2 April 1991.

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'It is difficult to be muddled' is a popular philosophy of life originating from a calligraphy

of Qing calligrapher and official Zheng Banqiao (1693–1765), *Nande Hutu*. Zheng Banqiao wanted to express his disappointment with corrupt officialdom, by saying that for him, as an official, it is difficult to pretend to be ignorant about abuses and corruption; that it is even more difficult to having understood the mundane world and its limitations without being able to change anything about it; and that it is the hardest to enter into a detached, 'muddled' state of mind, but without ignoring a problem and as such still being able to do something about it because there is no concern about future fame and gain. Nowadays, the wisdom behind the calligraphy has very pragmatically been adapted to the new societal context, and even has become a 'strategy' for becoming successful by knowing when and when not to (pretend to) be muddled concerning something. It is also one of the popular maxims used in an article by Charles Hammond, "The Chinese Strategy of Transcendence", *The American Journal of Semiotics* 23.1–4 (2007), pp. 253–276.

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See for instance Li Xiaopeng, *Xuexi gaibian mingyun (meige xuesheng dou yinggao du de shu) (Learning how to change one's fate – a book that every student should read)*, Xin Shijie Chubanshe (New World Press), Beijing 2006; Zhang Junjie, *Xiexie: yong gan'en de xin gaibian mingyun (Thank you: using gratefulness to change one's fate)*, Zhongguo Shangye Chubanshe, Beijing 2008.

tion about one's own happiness and how to realize it, which involves a sense of power to actively deal with one's own problems. Clearly, the aim here is not to serve society, but to take care of one's own fate. Furthermore, critical voices increasingly find ways to vent their grief, mostly through the internet, addressing – although often indirectly – problematic societal phenomena and protest against official policies. A fine example of a critical voice is the blogger called Kai Chen who, in a surprisingly open way, vents his grief as follows:

“People in China only worshipped those who are loyal to the Chinese emperors and Chinese state and Chinese race. Qu Yuan, Yue Fei, Yang Jiajiang [...] all have become national heroes for their loyalty to the dynasties and emperors. [...] Yet the Chinese have no iota of concept about what Morality is, what Truth is, what Conscience is, what Decency is, what Liberty and Happiness is. [...] They are covered under the bloody red [sic] Chinese National flags, covered by their own racial appearances, covered by their despotic symbols such as the Great Wall and Forbidden City and Qin Tomb.”⁶⁶

This example gives testimony of the on-going changes on the individual level: people start to consciously reflect on their lives, and question the influence of the state and their own role in society.

5. Changing relation individual–‘modern’ society: challenges and conflicts

Although growing personal autonomy and self-reliance is most apparent in a person's economical identity, the above quoted examples also show strong indications of identity building through choosing one's own priorities in life. This identity-building, however, rarely concerns public deviant behavior. Nevertheless, although there is no large reader's public, people at least express their thoughts more freely, including cases that infringe on state policy. It is no surprise that this is most obvious among young people. They grew up with the mental background of their parents, but in a completely different setting.⁶⁷ The new, ‘modern’ setting of globalization and liberalism encourages them to stand up for themselves, embrace new values and choose their own, less conformist life-style. Already in the 1980s, Chinese youths generally were not so enthusiastic about ‘serving the people’ as they were asked to do in the previous decennia. They further thought it was unrealistic to expect anyone to sacrifice everything for the nation. In the ‘80s and ‘90s, they did welcome the official ideology which advocated individual efforts and wealth with more emphasis on individual well-being than on collective well-being as was commonly accepted before the economic reforms. Other studies show a growing political apathy: the ideal of serving the one Party has lost its value. This political apathy can possibly be explained by the lack of confidence in Party members, but undoubtedly also by the fact that having good Party *guanxi* (relations) no longer is the only condition to successfully get things done.⁶⁸

How does the state react to this lack of interest in ‘serving the state’ and critical voices in society? One of the most obvious policy tools is the omnipresent nationalist propaganda, focusing on the individual contribution to the glory of the nation to tighten the relation individual-state. Deng Xiaoping already articulated patriotism as the main value system to delimit the legitimate boundaries of dissent, which, among other tasks, created the dynamics of nationalist and globalist discourse that have remained in place and have been developed by Deng's successors. When Hu Jintao became president in 2003, he official-

ly announced the Party's focus on the two Party policies: 'innovative science' (*kexue fazhan*) and 'the harmonious society' (*hexie shehui*). The individual is thus strongly encouraged to contribute to this harmonious society, be it with some more individual freedom in how to realize one's contribution than this was the case during the communist period of mass conformism; that is to say, preferably by consuming more and complaining less. As one of our informants, Shanghai fashion designer mister Zhang, observed: "the aim of the government is to keep people busy with earning money and encourage them to go traveling, spend money on cars, houses, etc, briefly said, to keep them busy enough not to be occupied with politics, but with the glory of the nation". In his opinion, popular culture promoted by the government is merely aimed at supporting the 'entertainment society' (*yule shehui*).⁶⁹

To reinforce nationalistic feelings, the promotion of traditional culture and in particular Confucian thought by the state is now undergoing a strong revival. A fine example of this are the popular radio and TV programs in which famous scholars explain traditional culture to the 'common people' (*laobaixing*).⁷⁰ As other cultural values, also the nucleus family ideal keeps being promoted, and even serves as a policy tool to alleviate the worst consequences of the sharp rise in ageing population.⁷¹ Contacts with the West are in no way contrary to nationalism. It is precisely through contacts with the West that the Chinese people become more aware of their 'Chineseness' (*zhonghuaxing*), cultural heritage and cultural richness, while the state pragmatically ensures the inevitable 'mutual influencing' develops in the right

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Chen Kai, Nande hutu "Confusion- Queer Chinese Virtue" Posted May 4th 2006 at http://boxun.com/hero/2006/zengning/135_1.shtml (Accessed 19th May 2009 – cannot be accessed anymore). This website could not be accessed in China, at least not during the Summer of 2009.

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The anthropological study of Zhu Jianfeng, "Seeking Pleasure and Health: Space, Consumption and Two Motherhoods in Post-Mao China", *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 2(2) (2009), pp. 66–93, provides an excellent example of how two generations of women – those who gave birth during the early post-Mao era, and their daughters who experienced childbirth in the late 1990s to the present day – deal differently with the same life experience of being pregnant, and, more particularly, how they deal with unhappiness during prenatal check-ups and seek pleasure through prenatal shopping.

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See J. Kwong, "Ideological Crisis among China's Youths: Values and Official Ideology", p. 252; and Guo Dingping, "Value Changes for Development and Democracy in China", *Changing Values and Challenges of Governance in Asia: Agenda for the New Millenium*, Seoul: National University, 1–14 (2000), pp. 6–7, p. 11.

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Zhang Da. Personal interview. Beijing: 1 October 2008.

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One of these programs is the *Baijia Jiangtan*, translated as "Lecture Forum from A Hundred Schools of Thought" See <http://space.tv.cctv.com/podcast/bjtit>. In this program, famous Chinese scholars on a daily basis discuss the Chinese Classics. The program was first broadcasted in July 2001, and is extremely popular, even to the extend that one of our informants who is manager of a lubricant oil company orders her employees to start the day with half an hour of this program. According to her, after frequently listening to the program, she even loves her country more than before. However, also here, there are critical voices who find the program too 'shallow' and too commercialized (*shangyehua*).

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The Confucian ideal of filial piety (*xiao*) has become less imperative for the younger generation. In addition, social security for the elderly is still far from optimal. Together with the one-child-policy, this results in massive problems in the field of care for the elderly. See for instance Yi Zeng, Dudley L. Poston jr., Denese A. Vlosky, and Danan Gu (eds.), *Healthy Longevity in China: Demographic, Socioeconomic and Psychological Dimensions*, Springer Publisher, Dordrecht 2008; and Judith Banister, *China's Changing Population*, Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 1986.

direction through expansive cultural-nationalist entertainment.⁷² This nationalist promotion is catered through a ‘bread and circuses’ approach, and should contribute to the harmonious society by keeping the people content. This policy is often referred to as the “getting rich and shut your mouth” society.⁷³

However, there are also signs of a constructive change in the relation individual-society. One of the best examples is probably the emergence of a Chinese civil society (*gongmin shehui*), in which the individual can express his concern for private and social issues.⁷⁴ Domestic scandals such as frequent mining accidents, the huge environmental problems, SARS (2003) and the poisoned milk powder problem (2008) seem to have woken up social conscience. Along with international pressure, these huge problems have obviously made people aware of the responsibility they have, not only towards the state as a father, but also towards their fellow countrymen in general. This kind of emerging social conscience is – just as the reflection about one’s personal happiness – a fairly new phenomenon. Fei Xiaotong argued that while people in Chinese society display no distinct individualism comparable to the individualism that characterizes Western societies, Chinese society seems to exhibit more egocentrism than Western societies do.⁷⁵ The issue of a civil society, a Western concept that is primarily present in highly democratized states, has now entered the discourse of Chinese intellectuals, and moulds their thoughts on the relation state-individual.⁷⁶ Typical products of a civil society are the growing number of NGOs, institutionalized voluntary services, and even the, albeit very initial, growing awareness of the principles of corporate social responsibility in companies to strengthen competitiveness.⁷⁷ The present discourse about civil society, however preliminary it may be, gives us indications of the direction ‘the individualistic society’ will take in the future: that of more social responsibility not always in favor of the state, but of each of its citizens.

Another (potentially) significant development that expresses the changing relation state-individual in favor of more protection of the individual is the effort the government makes to set up more rule of law (*fazhi*), in particular with respect to civil rights.⁷⁸ Although Lin Yutang (1895–1976) stated that “the hatred of any mechanistic view of law and government was so great that it has made government by law impossible in China”, Fei Xiaotong later argued that since modern society is composed of ‘strangers,’ oral agreements based on trust can no longer be binding as this was the case in rural society where everyone knew everyone and social control was always very high.⁷⁹ This observation, together with the growing resistance against corruption and the support of the state to fight it, as well as the growing social insecurity, have now made more rule of law a social priority.⁸⁰ However, for the central government, a growing decentralization of power continues to make it very difficult to ensure that the rule of law is obeyed by all individuals, and, especially, by local officials, in order to prove its validity. In his essay on the discussion of the relationship between Chinese traditional culture and China’s modernization, Zi Zhongyun summarizes this difficult process as follows:

“Modernization requires a turn from ‘rule by man’ to ‘rule by law’. Major social changes are inevitably accompanied by major cultural changes whether one likes it or not. Precisely because the ‘pre-modern’ culture of China was perfectly developed, the process of modernization of the Chinese nation has to be more painful than that of other nations. Here one needs to take a detached approach rather than a sentimental one, and the question of who is superior to whom is irrelevant.”⁸¹

Along with the traditional mistrust in written law, it will indeed require persistent support from the state to turn to a reliable and realistic rule of law which effectively gives more protection to the individual.

6. Conclusion

In China's modernization process, modernization does not mean – as is commonly accepted – a complete integration of elements of typical western

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See for instance Jeremy R. Barmé's article "To Screw Foreigners is Patriotic", in *In the Red*, pp. 255–280. Chineseness (*zhong-huaxing*) itself has no clear definition. It is a kind of "Chinese 'subjectivity' that entails a Chinese way of thinking, and in particular Chinese ethics and aesthetics as part of a Chinese cultural identity". See Karl-Heinz Pohl, "Identity and Hybridity – Chinese Culture and Aesthetics in the Age of Globalization", in: Antoon Van Den Braembussche, Heinz Kimmerle, and Nicole Note (eds.), *Intercultural Aesthetics. A Worldview Perspective*, Springer Netherlands, Brussel (2008), p. 93. More recently, it primarily encompasses a kind of cultural nationalism, which, according to some scholars, should be considered a 'cultural reclamation', see for instance Zhang Yinde, "La "sinité": l'identité chinoise en question", in Anne Cheng (ed.), *La Pensée en Chine aujourd'hui*. Gallimard, Paris 2007, p. 301. Especially in 2009, the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China gave rise to a huge amount of nationalist TV programs. See for instance the BBC article "China pupils told to love the nation", accessible at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8231324.stm> (2nd September 2009).

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See for instance Éric Meyer, *Sois riche et tais-toi! Portrait de la Chine d'aujourd'hui*, Robert Laffont, Paris 2002. Undoubtedly, there are also critical voices who see through the whole 'bread and circuses' façade. One of my informants explicitly complained about the opening ceremony of the Olympics Games in 2008. According to him and his friends, it was just mere "keeping the Chinese people and the west naïve" about what is really going on. The fact that they involved many children in the ceremony, was according to them a deliberate choice of misleading foreigners to show them "the innocent face of China" (and according to my informant also the words used by director Zhang Yimou himself). See for other critical voices from the art scene on the cultural deficit also G. Barmé, *In the Red*, p. 364.

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He Xirong defines 'civil society' as "a kind of association and organization in between the individual and the state, a free realm which is protected but not interfered with by the state". See He Xirong, "Collective Identity and Civil

Society", in: Wang Miaoyang, Yu Xuanmeng and Dy Manuel B. (eds.), *Civil Society in a Chinese Context. The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy*, Washington DC 1997.

75

See Fei X., *From the Soil*, p. 60. This can be interpreted as rooted in the concept of concentric circles, in which everything is depending on the relation with the 'center' Self, which makes the 'ego' the most important point of reference.

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For an extensive examination of civil society in China, see Timothy Brook and Michael B. Frolic (eds.), *Civil Society in China*, Studies on Contemporary China. M.E. Sharpe, Armonk (NY) 1997.

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For an excellent analysis of the rapid growth of Chinese NGO's as a measure for profound social change, see Ma Quisha (ed.), *Non-governmental Organizations in Contemporary China. Paving the Way to Civil Society?*, Routledge, New York (NY) 2006.

78

See Brian Hook (ed.), *The Individual and the Chinese State*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1996, p. 34.

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See Lin Yutang, *The Importance of Living (Shenghuo de yishu)*, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing (1998 [2007]), p. 111; and Fei X., *From the Soil*, p. 42

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A survey published in 1999 showed that the Chinese youth considered corruption as the most serious problem (61,9%, on the second place 'unemployment' with 51%), see Guo D., "Value Changes for Development and Democracy in China", p. 11. The same article discusses the growing trust in legal systems, see Guo D., "Value Changes for Development and Democracy in China", p. 9.

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Zi, Zhongyun, "The Relationship of Chinese Traditional Culture to the Modernization of China: an introduction to the Current Discussion", *Asian Survey*, 27 (4) (1987), p. 449.



modern society in traditional Chinese culture. Obviously, capitalism and even communism are western concepts, but as such they have always been very pragmatically adapted to the – equally changing – Chinese circumstances and ways of thinking.⁸² Prominent signs of modernization such as growing individual autonomy, self-reliance and freedom, walk hand in hand with the increasing promotion and admiration for traditional culture, as the quotation from Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* in the beginning of this article indicates. The path to modernization, including growing individualism and the challenges this poses on both individual and on state level, is not always a 'harmonious' one. However, if we may believe Émile Durkheim, individualization is in itself not something the state has to fear. Rather on the contrary. In the end, individuals will need each other more, and social capital will grow.⁸³ The emergence of a civil society is a clear development in this direction, just as the growing importance of the concept of 'rule of law' is. That this process will benefit social cohesion and harmony in a different way than it did before in Chinese history, and in a different way than it did in the West, should not distress us. After all, "As always the history of the past inevitably continues to be the history of the present."⁸⁴ What is clear though, is that, in contemporary China, the individual will gain a new form of self-assurance.

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**Samopouzdanje i samoporicanje:
Repozicioniranje pojedinca u suvremenom kineskom društvu**

Sažetak

U članku se tvrdi da je tradicionalno kinesko društvo karakterizirala "struktura dijela i cjeline" u kojoj se vrijednost pojedinca mjerila prema njegovoj vrijednosti za društvo. U Europi, počevši od sredine petnaestog stoljeća, razvilo se društvo kojeg je karakterizirala "struktura jednog i mnogih". U takvome društvu pojedinac slobodno bira u koje se organizacije uključuje. Čovjek se počeo smatrati kreativnim djelatnikom u povijesti a osobna sloboda shvaćena je kao nužan preduvjet za kreativno djelovanje. Usporedno s razvojem kapitalizma, suvremeno kinesko društvo obilježava pomak od tradicionalne "strukture dijela i cjeline" prema "strukтури jednog i mnogih". Analizirajući neka osobna stajališta pojedinaca te internetskih autora, u članku se istražuje promjena mjesta pojedinca u suvremenom kineskom društvu.

Ključne riječi

konfucijanizam, kapitalizam, individualizam, kolektivizam, društveni odnosi

Bart Dessein, Mieke Matthyssen

**Selbstbewusstsein und Selbstverleugnung:
Umstellung des Individuums in der zeitgenössischen chinesischen Gesellschaft**

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel vertritt die Ansicht, dass die traditionelle chinesische Gesellschaft durch die „Teil-Ganzes-Struktur“ gekennzeichnet wurde, in welcher der Wert des Einzelnen an seinem Wert für die Gesellschaft gemessen wurde. Beginnend mit der Mitte des 15. Jahrhunderts entwickelte sich in Europa eine Gesellschaft, die durch die „Viele-einer-Struktur“ charakterisiert wird. In einer solchen Gesellschaft wählt der Einzelne freiwillig, welchen Organisationen er oder sie sich anschließt. Der Mensch wurde als kreativer Akteur in der Geschichte angesehen und die persönliche Freiheit wurde als notwendiges Erfordernis für die kreative Tätigkeit aufgefasst. Zusammen mit der Entwicklung des Kapitalismus erlebt die gegenwärtige chinesische Gesellschaft eine Verlagerung von der traditionellen „Teil-Ganzes-Struktur“ hin zur „Viele-ei-

ner-Struktur“ mit. Indem er individuelle Meinungen der chinesischen persönlichen Informanten und Internetautoren analysiert, untersucht dieser Artikel die Positionsänderung des Individuums im Rahmen der zeitgenössischen chinesischen Gesellschaft.

Schlüsselwörter

Konfuzianismus, Kapitalismus, Individualismus, Kollektivismus, soziale Beziehungen

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Confiance en soi et abnégation de soi : repositionnement de l'individu dans la société chinoise contemporaine

Résumé

Cet article affirme que la société traditionnelle chinoise a été caractérisée par « la structure de la partie et du tout » dans laquelle la valeur de l'individu se mesurait par rapport à la valeur qu'il attribuait à la société. En Europe, à partir du milieu du XVI^e siècle, s'est développée une société qui a été caractérisée par la « structure de l'un et du multiple ». Dans une telle société l'individu libre choisit quelles organisations il souhaite intégrer. L'Homme a commencé à être perçu comme un agent créatif, et la liberté individuelle à être comprise comme une condition nécessaire pour une action créative. Parallèlement à l'évolution du capitalisme, la société chinoise contemporaine se distancie de « la structure de la partie et du tout » et se rapproche de « la structure de l'un et du multiple ». Analysant l'opinion personnelle de certains individus, et d'auteurs chinois sur internet, l'article étudie les changements de positions de l'individu dans la société contemporaine chinoise.

Mots-clés

confucianisme, capitalisme, individualisme, collectivisme, relations sociales

Zi Zhongyun also mentions the term 'rule according to rite' (*lizhi*) to describe the Confucian absolute imperial authority, see Zi, Z., "The Relationship of Chinese Traditional Culture to the Modernization of China: An Introduction to the Current Discussion", p. 448.

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This is the so-called 'Chinese learning as essential principle and Western learning as practical application' (*zhong ti xi yong*), a strategy for dealing with Western influence. This principle has already been criticized by many scholars, such as Li Zehou, who proposes to turn it the other way around and make it

'Western learning as essential principle and Chinese learning as practical application' (*xi ti zhong yong*), see Zi, Z., "The Relationship of Chinese Traditional Culture to the Modernization of China: An Introduction to the Current Discussion", p. 451.

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Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, transl. George Simpson, Free Press, New York (NY) 1964.

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B. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, p. 1.