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**The Action of Non-Action: Walter Benjamin, *wu wei*, and critiquing capitalism in the era of natural catastrophe**

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*Abstract:*

Beginning with a discussion of adaptations of François Jullien’s understanding of ‘potential born of disposition’ and ‘silent transformation’ in two recent analyses of capitalist contemporaneity (by Bennett and Dufourmantelle), this essay argues that ‘China’ as a philosophical tool bears within it a rich and underanalyzed genealogy that reframes critical theory’s approach to nature and its objects in a new geopolitical context. The remainder of the essay then unpacks the intellectual history and textual philology of one earlier and pivotal moment of critical theory’s entanglement with ‘China’: Walter Benjamin’s transformation of ‘non-action’, or *wu wei*, into a complex for thinking through possibilities of not-being in debt to Being.

*Keywords:* François Jullien, Walter Benjamin, Max Weber, Bertolt Brecht, *wu wei*, Daoism, capitalism, nature

I. ‘China’ as a philosophical tool

In spite of never treating historical or contemporary forms of political economy explicitly—and in spite of attracting criticism for neglecting the practical implications of his philosophy, idealizing ‘China’ as a pre-Western-impact ‘exteriority’, and surreptitiously reappropriating the universal for a Sino-centric way of thinking (Weber, Ralph, 2015; Billeter, 2006; Nakajima, 2016)—François Jullien’s work has nevertheless played a pivotal if little acknowledged role in recent discussions of contemporary capitalism and its relation to

nature and its objects. Responding to the conjuncture in which critical theory apparently no longer finds that the language of autonomy, self-organization, participation, or even culture suffice to capture the agency of nonhuman ‘actors’ such as the electrical power grid or weather phenomena, Jane Bennett, for instance, has proposed ‘vital materialism’ as a way to expand the scope of agency to include precisely those types of actions that ‘no one’ does yet impact on our social and political worlds (Bennett, 2010: xix). Drawing on what she calls the ‘congregational agency’ of *shi*, a concept that she borrows from Jullien’s account of ‘the Chinese tradition’, Bennett sees a ‘propensity’ (itself a term derived from Jullien [1995]) inhering in a specific arrangement of things rather than any one element within it, that is, in an ‘assemblage’, and dispenses with ‘ontotheological’ distinctions between life and matter in order to posit that raw materials, storms, commodities, and edibles ‘act’ in a ‘political ecology’ whose ‘tendencies’ are irreducible to human consumption and its agendas (Bennett, 2010: viii, 34-35). For Bennett, harnessing the objective necessity and intensity of thingly propensity releases things from the restricted conception of their agency as a mere matter of their recalcitrance or brokenness and opens up the possibility of a politics that is emergent rather than deliberative, non-hierarchical rather than linear, and in any event untethered from the interests and calculations of the moral consumer-subject.

Similarly, Anne Dufourmantelle writes in *Power of Gentleness*, ‘we must recognize the central role that Chinese culture gives to transitions, to invisible germinations, and to sentient life’ (Dufourmantelle, 2018: 38). ‘Gentleness’, the aptitude to harness emergence and process, comes for her above all in forms that are ‘rare in the West’ (Dufourmantelle, 2018: 35) and, exemplarily, are attuned to the ‘silent transformations’ that Jullien shows to ‘constitute what European metaphysics has the most difficulty understanding’ (Dufourmantelle, 2018: 38). In *Les Transformations Silencieuses*, Jullien speaks of ‘that which defeats our Greek opposition between the natural and the technical (*phusis/technē*)’ by

‘assisting what comes about all by itself’—*aider ce qui vient tout seul*—which is his partial translation of a line from §64 of the *Daodejing* that reads, in its entirety, *yi fu wan wu zhi zi ran er bu gan wei*, or, in the 1842 translation by Stanislas Julien, ‘he dares not act in order to help all beings follow their nature (*il n’ose pas agir afin d’aider tous les êtres à suivre leur nature*)’ (Jullien, 2009a: 186; Laozi, 1842). In Jullien’s account, assisting the coming-about-by-itself of things, or *fu zi ran*, thus involves precisely not a restoration to a static nature by withdrawing purposive action but, rather, what he calls a ‘strategy’ of ‘maturing the effect’, a harnessing of the potential in things to themselves disaggregate such that there is no longer a need for ‘action’ (*wei*) as such (Jullien, 2009a: 185). For Dufourmantelle, the power of this assistance—this ‘gentleness’—intensifies the ‘metamorphosis of becoming into acquiescence to that same becoming’ since it ‘contains the seed of its opposite’ and effectuates a ‘change of nature’ in harmony with ‘the capacity of processes for self-deployment’ in the ‘natural’ environment (Dufourmantelle, 2018: 19, 39-40; Jullien, 2009a: 187, translation modified). Gentleness, Dufourmantelle argues, therefore poses a particular threat to neoliberal society because not only does it not ‘offer any possible foothold on authority’ (Dufourmantelle, 2018: 3), it immerses its practitioner in the negativity, insufficiency, and precariousness of all beings, the histories and understanding of which contemporary ideologies of productivism and consumerism set out to devastate.

Bennett and Dufourmantelle can be said to exemplify a principle that Jullien has identified in respect to the political value of his work: ‘China’, at least prior to Western impact, is a ‘philosophical tool’ in the shape of a ‘detour’ by way of which one might arrive at a better manner of framing one’s own problems (Zarcone, 2003: 20). Yet Jullien himself never denies that Chinese ‘tradition’ is itself an emergent and conflictual field with a contemporaneity of its own, even if he leaves the implications unexplored. The definition of ‘silent transformation’ that Dufourmantelle cites, ‘taking part in the propensities at work over

time as well as the capacity of processes for self-deployment', is used by Jullien to describe Deng Xiaoping, the "Little Helmsman" and "silent transformer" of China: advancing step by step, or "stone by stone", as he said, rather than projecting some plan or model, yet without falling back into an empiricism (or pragmatism) that is the reverse of our idealism' (Jullien, 2009a: 187). For Jullien, silent transformation finds a historical equivalent in the 'more efficient than spectacular' reforms that Deng initiated in the 1980s to foster villagers' self-governance, rule of law, and entrepreneurship and marketization particularly in the rural regions such that 'China was able to completely reverse its social and economic system by continuous transition while leaving the regime and the Party in place' (Jullien, 2009a: 187). Jullien's idealization of Deng—it remains debatable how even the transformation in fact was (Gong, 2010) and how exactly economic and political liberalization correlated or continued in the decades during and since Deng (compare Huang, 2008 and Klein, 2010)—also underpins his interpretation of *shi*. In *The Propensity of Things*, Jullien argues for the value of the 'concept of potential born of disposition' by invoking Mao Zedong's use thereof 'to explain the tactics most appropriate to a war of resistance—the "long" war—against Japan' as 'a tactic of "alertness" and spontaneous reaction to all occasions and situations' involving an 'alternation' between withdrawal (to the caves of Shaanxi) and opportune return (Jullien, 1995: 34 and 296n.57). 'Alternation' also describes the rhetorical policy followed during times of transition, the prime example of which is the scapegoating and rehabilitation of Deng during de-Maoization, which Jullien describes as 'prudently managing a silent transformation of the Great Helmsman'<sup>1</sup> (Jullien, 2009a: 187). In sum, *shi* finds its transhistorical value as a military-rhetorical strategy for maintaining the image of Party continuity by correlating it with one of successful infrastructural and agricultural reform. At a time when the Party's practice of repurposing ancient concepts for ideological reconstruction has become a matter for public scholarly debate, Jullien inadvertently exposes a point at

which the search for an alternative, more viable ontology than Western metaphysics can offer verges on endorsement for a new founding mythology.<sup>2</sup>

As much as they have to impart, Bennett's and Dufourmantelle's critiques of mass consumption and relentless productivity also trade on the 'Chinese' idea of assisting the effect of the unplanned without ever interrogating its fashioning *as* a timeless counterimage to 'the West'. For both, 'China' and 'nature' are therefore interchangeable; enthralled by the image of ancient China, they fail to see China as a contemporary in capitalist modernity, highlighting how, given a certain methodology, the very promise of an emergent, nonproductivist, even nonmoral politics of 'assisting nature' might be rendered virtually indistinguishable from the justificatory myths that attend the long history of global capitalism. Here the spotlight on Jullien's contribution to the discussion of contemporary capitalism's relation to nature and its objects reveals another attendant genealogy. Elaborating on China's nature-assistive political economy, Jullien remarks that *fu zi ran* is 'agricultural' because it is 'not pastoral', that is, derived under the aegis of a monotheistic creator-shepherd (Jullien, 2009a: 186). A century earlier, the same argument was retrieved by Max Weber from Jesuit missionary archives to establish 'China' as stagnant, non-competitive, and lacking the religious condition requisite for an indigenous capitalism. Abstracted from historical reality, 'China-nature' is a normative construction that reifies transformation and ignores the asymmetries of power that inhere in material relations; within this genealogy, 'nature' never acts in ways that truly threaten human-normative interests, and 'China', unrecognized as a version of capitalism, idealizes the very kinds of economic doctrine Western anticapitalism rejects.<sup>3</sup>

As a philosophical 'tool', 'China' thus also reframes critical theory's approach to nature in a new geopolitical context and reorients economy's relation to ecology around that which exceeds the calculations of both—in short, natural catastrophe on a nonhuman scale. In

what follows, I propose to interrogate a scene where this reorientation is made explicit:

Walter Benjamin's criticism of Weber's assessment of China's 'naturalistic' incapacity to engender capitalism. Key here is that while remaining in a textual register, Benjamin's notion of China nevertheless captures China's contemporaneity as a state in transition. Benjamin's elaboration of 'non-action' or *wu wei*, a principle broadly associated with philosophical Daoism, thus helps specify incapacities associated with 'China' such as non-productivity, non-calculation and non-consumption as figures that are woven into the time of capital itself. Through Benjamin, non-action acquires the sense of an action, lending new critical relevance to Jullien's 'silent transformation' and 'potential born of disposition', both of which derive from *wu wei*: as Jullien argues in *The Great Image Has No Form*, non-action indexes China's dissociation from Western ontology's preoccupation with a privileging of actualization bound to the logic of Christian salvation history, while in Chinese nontheology and nonontology (Jullien, 2009b: 7-8) non-action implies a state of not-being in 'debt' to Being. In what follows, I first reconstruct Benjamin's nonontological elaboration of *Schuld* (debt, guilt) from his critical altercation with Weber's thesis concerning China in 'Capitalism as Religion' (1921). Benjamin, I argue, understands non-action as non-assimilation to anything resulting from a creative act, which I trace in section III back to his conception in 'Metaphysics of Youth' (1914) that *wu wei* reconfigures life's very destiny. In section IV, I examine Benjamin's proposal to replace debt-guilt with non-existence as the structuring principle for all natural life. I conclude by briefly considering Benjamin's contribution to a broader project of mobilizing alternative ontologies to address ecological concerns today.

## II. Capitalism as religion

At the close of 'Capitalism as Religion', a fragment composed around the time when he was first formulating his ideas on history, myth, and the state, Benjamin describes the

situation into which capitalism appears to have mired everyone. Capitalism, he writes, ‘saw’ an ‘unmistakable member of its community’ even in those who are not gainfully employed (Benjamin, 2021: 92). Like religion, which according to Benjamin did not categorically exclude the individual who was irreligious or of another faith, capitalism makes no ‘moral’ distinction between those contributing and not contributing to productivity; the bottom line, after all—the *Bilanz*, which calculates gross products and net worth according to a ‘balance sheet’ of plusses and minuses—is itself the bottom line for the way in which religion counts its acolytes, who are redeemed and disposed of by the same calculus (Benjamin, 2021: 92). ‘In exactly the same sense’, Benjamin writes, individuals, whether they are earning or non-earning dependents, are equally members of capitalism’s community even if one cannot or refuses to be productive (Benjamin, 2021: 92). In capitalism, therefore, no one is neither productive nor non-productive; no one falls outside of the calculus of net productivity. As Benjamin writes in an earlier passage of the fragment, the burden of debt is spread across the community by the various ways in which it reckons, firstly, with its working week, which is of ‘permanent duration’ (Benjamin, 2021: 90); secondly, its course—it ‘stands’ in the midst and as part of a ‘downward sweep’ of indebteding from which it knows not how to escape; and thirdly, its destination, which is the total inculcation of the world, including the inculcation of its end, such that even the state of utter hopelessness—‘the world condition of despair’, in which God himself is implicated—is itself only ‘just about still hoped for’, albeit barely, inasmuch as the expectation of salvation will necessarily be frustrated (Benjamin, 2021: 90). As Benjamin argues: ‘therein lies what is historically unprecedented about capitalism: religion is no longer the reform of Being but, rather, its shattering’ (Benjamin, 2021: 91). And, just as there is no ‘reform’ available to ‘Being’, there is ‘no way out’ of this ‘condition [*Zustand*]’ (Benjamin, 2021: 92); not participating in capitalism is just as much participation in capitalism, and ‘we cannot close the net in which we stand’ (Benjamin, 2021: 90).

Yet, he suggests, we must try to survey this possibility. In his effort to ‘close the net’ of net productivity, Benjamin turns to Weber’s work on the economic ethics of religious thought. He glosses its main argument as follows: ‘capitalism [is] a religiously conditioned construction’ (Benjamin, 2021: 90). The fact that Benjamin refers to Weber’s work on the relation between economics and religion has sometimes been remarked upon, but what seems to have gone entirely unnoticed by the scholarship is that the argument Benjamin summarizes is taken not from Weber’s most well-known study in this field, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (orig. 1904-5; Weber, 1992), which endeavored to describe the vocational ethic at work in Puritan rationalism, but from its sequel, *Confucianism and Daoism* of 1915 (Weber, 1951)<sup>4</sup>, in which Weber sought to establish for the first time what he believed to be unique to the development of modern industrial capitalism: that it was necessarily facilitated by the religious tradition that emerged in early modern Europe. In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber had declined to maintain that the spirit of capitalism could only have arisen as a result of the Reformation, insisting instead that the capitalist economic system was an unintended consequence of the Calvinist ethos. In *Confucianism and Daoism*, by contrast, Weber attributes the emergence of rational entrepreneurial capitalism to the presence of a certain kind of religiously conditioned mentality by arguing that the lack of such a mentality in China prevented the development of a capitalist economy, in spite of the fact that Confucianism shared certain rational traits with Protestantism.<sup>5</sup> In characterizing religion as a ‘condition’ of capitalism, Benjamin refers to the argument presented in Weber’s latter work that an identity can be supposed of religious calling and capitalist ethos and that, moreover, the ethical qualities that are indispensable for the modern capitalist, which include a ‘radical concentration on God-ordained purposes’ (Weber, 1951: 247), was a prerequisite for ‘a horror of illegal, political, colonial, booty, and monopoly types of capitalism’ (Weber, 1951: 247).

Weber, for his part, substantiates his thesis by describing what he sees as China's two main religions, Daoism and Confucianism, as essentially derivative of the same mystical-naturalistic impulse: for him, both were expressions of the same 'uninterruptedness of magic as such and power of the clan' (Weber, 1921: 369)<sup>6</sup>, and both were consistent in regard to their underlying theories of '*Nichtstun* [doing nothing]'—one of the translations of the principle of *wu wei* that Weber adopts (Weber, 1920: 465)—as well as their sense of cosmic order and direction of nature, or *dao*. In both his translations and interpretations of these two principles, Weber reproduces the argument made by Dutch sinologist Jan Jakob Maria de Groot, whose *Religion of China* he cites throughout (De Groot, 1912). De Groot held that in spite of any other differences regarding their relation to the state's constitution later on<sup>7</sup>—Confucianism, in his view<sup>8</sup>, eventually became the state orthodoxy—both Confucianism and Daoism were originally branches of the same 'religion of the Universe'. For this religion, de Groot invents a new name—'Universism', which is also the subtitle of the book—and describes it as 'the *one* religion of China' that, moreover, is synonymous with the *dao* or, as he puts it, the way the universe moves, conducts itself, and rotates and renews. In line with this, the *dao* of human beings is to imitate the cosmic *dao* as closely as possible in a calculation to achieve happiness as beings that are absolutely dependent on a universe with nothing beyond (De Groot, 1912: 3-6, 11).<sup>9</sup>

Thus, to cite one of de Groot's examples, perfection is 'emptiness (*hü*)' and 'nothingness (*wu*)', and it is achieved by suppressing desires and passions, removing knowledge, striving for nothing through 'inaction (*wu wei*)', 'quiescence (*tsing*)' and 'taciturnity (*puh yeh*)', and thereby becoming free from 'cares' (De Groot, 1912: 62-3). But, de Groot surmises, inasmuch as *dao* is not action that causes any movement, it is therefore the law of movement itself, of inward spontaneity, and therefore was also interpreted as a principle of rulership (De Groot, 1912: 68). Abiding by inaction therefore translates into the

spontaneous transformation of myriad beings (*wan wu*) or, as Laozi says in de Groot's words: 'The Tao is always without action, and so there is nothing which it does not perform. ... [He] who cultivates the Tao diminishes his knowledge from day to day ... till he arrives at inaction; having arrived at inaction, there is nothing which he cannot do' (De Groot, 1912: 69-70). According to de Groot, this 'quietism' was retained as a property of Confucianism as well even after its bifurcation from Daoism; indeed, de Groot emphasizes, Confucius was a great admirer of *wu wei* (De Groot, 1912: 67, 71-72). It blossomed, ultimately, into the practice of *feng shui*, the pseudo-science of geomancy and chronomancy that developed eventually into doctrines that were incorporated into the State religion and whose expansion even emperors tried to put a check on in vain (De Groot, 1912: 288-290).

Following de Groot, Weber writes: '[t]his Chinese "universist" philosophy and cosmogony transformed the world into a magic garden. Every Chinese fairy tale reveals the popularity of irrational magic. Wild and unmotivated *dei ex machina* swarm through the world and can do anything; only countercharms help. In the face of this the ethical rationality of the miracle is out of the question' (Weber, 1951: 200; de Groot, 1912: 63). That is, for Weber, Chinese immanence, which saw the world in a state of pervasive and magic 'irrationality', by definition eliminated the grounds for effort and action. Weber thereby characterized the entirety of 'China', inasmuch as it was not 'Calvinist Europe', by the impulse to adjust one's self to the *dao* of the world as it happens to be, a trait that, he argued, persisted even in the secular bureaucracy perpetuated by Confucianism. And in so doing, Weber also eliminated from consideration the many instances of transcendence and the miraculous evidenced by the millenarian movements attached to Daoist sects since China's early medieval period (Ownby, 1999). For Weber, 'the religion of China' lacked a theologically-based despair at the universe and was therefore devoid of the creative impulse to dominate over nature and transform the world, which confirmed for him—in the language

of a Daoist elite seeking to define itself in opposition to the eschatological practices of its popular counterpart—how the Protestant ethic and its facilitation of impersonal and universal trust alone could have been conducive to the genesis of modern capitalism’s entrepreneurial spirit and depersonalized credit system. Framed as immanent from the perspective of an establishment reinforcing itself with traditionalism against heterodoxy and rebellion, ‘Chinese religion’ was thus for Weber a condition that was especially inauspicious to the rise of rational capitalism. If ‘capitalism [is indeed] a religiously conditioned construction’, which is how Benjamin sums up Weber’s position (Benjamin, 2021: 90), its ‘religious condition’ would have to be found in the ascetic ethic and prophecy of a supramundane God that produced a ‘tension between nature and deity, between ethical demand and human shortcoming, consciousness of sin and need for salvation, conduct on earth and compensation in the beyond, religious duty and socio-political reality’ (Weber, 1951: 235-36).

For Benjamin, by contrast, who not only cites the revised edition of Weber’s essay on China (Weber, 1920)<sup>10</sup> but also had grave reservations concerning the ‘outdated methodologies’ applied to the study of mythology by de Groot’s book, whose 1918 German edition he had read by early 1919 (GB 2: 11)<sup>11</sup>, capitalism was not only ‘a religiously conditioned construction’ but ‘an essentially religious phenomenon’ with no need of ‘special dogmatics’ to underpin its meaning (Benjamin, 2021: 90). Capitalism itself has the features of a religion for Benjamin; its existence is independent of the ‘special’ structures of Christianity as such—and hence as defined by Weber. Whereas Weber argues, inversely from his analysis of China, that capitalism is conditioned on a salvation religion featuring a supramundane God and tension between earthly conduct and afterworldly compensation that are exclusive to Protestantism, Benjamin maintains that capitalism shares an ‘essence’ with that which also brought about salvation religion and that capitalism might thus take root anywhere this essence can be found (Benjamin, 2021: 91). This essence, which ‘in the West’

produces a capitalism whose history is ‘essentially’ identical to that of Christianity, is the ‘mere cult’ of *Schuld*, an ‘ambiguous’ concept, Benjamin notes, whose meaning oscillates between guilt and its close cognate, debt [*Schulden*], because it belongs to an ‘original paganism’ that conceives of religion as ‘the most immediate practical interest’: one enters the moral sphere of guilt when one takes blame and thereby incurs a debt (Benjamin, 2021: 90, 92). So while Weber suggests that ‘China’ lacks the eschatological impulse to engender capitalism, Benjamin argues that the cult’s conception of religion ‘was no more clear about its “ideal” or “transcendent” nature than contemporary capitalism is’ (Benjamin, 2021: 92). Indeed, capitalist ‘cult religion’ describes that condition under which God no longer stands outside of creation but has been ‘drawn *into* human fate’ to be ‘inculcated [*verschuldet*]’ in the vain hope of arriving at a highly ambiguous surrogate of salvation: a ‘world condition of despair’ intended to finally deliver capitalism’s world from its state of permanent inculcation. More than a mere product of despair, capitalism itself produces despair—the tension between consciousness of guilt and otherworldly compensation grounding the capitalist ethic—and promises deliverance by the very same means that lead to its condition. With the inculcation of God himself, capitalism thus hopes not so much for the expiation [*Sühne*] of guilt as ‘de-expiation [*Entsühnen*]’, an elimination of the entire inculcating-expiating dynamic underpinning the ‘world condition’ of its ‘religious system’ (Benjamin, 2021: 90). But this hope remains vain so long as its means of delivery is producing despair by universalizing debt-guilt, which only intensifies the situation it is to rectify. When capitalism knows only the one mechanism of effort and action, debt becomes an end in itself.

Yet this ‘world condition’ is, therefore, historical in character: for Benjamin, Christianity is not the set of enabling institutional and religious factors but a stage in the development of capitalism itself (Benjamin, 2021: 92). In the course of this development, according to Benjamin, capitalism’s features, notably its universal and impersonal credit

system and the rationalization of enterprise, must have arisen from conditions out of which, according to Weber, capitalism cannot arise: the ‘magic garden’ in which millenarian rebellion is supposedly impossible. From this emerges the most crucial point of divergence between Benjamin and Weber: for Benjamin, the mythic structures that underpin political economy do not distinguish between European and non-European ‘ideal types’<sup>12</sup> but themselves contain and make legible epoch-ending historical transformations.<sup>13</sup> Only thus, in fact, could it be explained how for Benjamin even the non-productive individual without a vocation comes to participate in capitalism, and how no one falls outside of the calculus of net productivity. By the same token, the non-participating individual retains a mark of their non-faith; beyond the purview of the ‘contemporary bourgeoisie’ (Benjamin, 2021: 92), which is to say, originally, the non-participating individual’s non-productivity is the inverse of a non-activity from which no capitalism ensues. In their ‘original paganism’ (Benjamin, 2021: 92), one assimilates to the way of the world as it happens to exist; no one assimilates to a universe that is the result of a creative act. Neither productive nor non-productive, the action of this no one thus issues from a place in which we cannot stand, but from which the net of net productivity might possibly be drawn close.

### III. No one’s actions

Of the efficacy of no one’s action Benjamin certainly knew something because he had, in fact, had an earlier introduction to what in respect to the Protestant ethic might have appeared as an ‘original paganism’ (Benjamin, 2021: 92). While a member of the German Free Student movement during his student years, Benjamin had, apparently upon the recommendation of the school reformer Gustav Wyneken, studied an essay collection entitled *Chinas Verteidigung gegen europäischen Ideen* (*China’s Defence against European Ideas*),

which was written by the Malay-Chinese civil servant Gu Hongming and published in German in 1911, the year of the Republican Revolution (Gu, 1911). Gu was a sympathizer of the Qing dynasty and argued that China was in the midst of a cultural crisis resulting from the loss of Manchu nobility and, as Benjamin recalls, ‘violation’ at the hands of ‘the cynical, industrial spirit of Europe’ (GB 1: 77; see also Müller, 2006: 7). Drawing sympathetic parallels between John Henry Newman’s anti-liberal Oxford Movement and the (failed) conservative political movement led by the *Qingliudang* group against ‘modern European ideas of progress’, Gu identified in the imperial-aristocratic class the potential to renew the movement and rescue ‘culture’, so Benjamin paraphrases, from ‘a chaotic time’ (GB 1: 77-78; see Gu, 1911: 30-43, 108). Discussing the book in a letter to his friend Ludwig Strauss in 1912, Benjamin writes that he sees a similarity between the renewing movement described by Gu and the Free Student Movement’s pedagogical project of providing a ‘conscious asylum of real, existing culture’ within Wilhelmine Germany—though, in the same breath, he also admits to his ‘complete ignorance of Chinese politics’, wryly signalling precisely his awareness thereof and of Gu’s position therein (GB 1: 77).

Nevertheless, Gu left an important trace in Benjamin’s oeuvre: his conviction that in both East and West there exist internally divergent tendencies, including the tendency to decline, suggesting a deeper consensus between the two traditions than can be adequately explained by the model of a clash of civilizations (Gu, 1911: 6, 22-27).<sup>14</sup> In fact, Gu’s popularity in Europe—and probably his attractiveness to Wyneken and the Free Student movement—may have been due in no small part to his idea that Western imperialism and the ‘Westernization’ of China alike could be traced back to the reintroduction of liberal ideas in the nineteenth century in both Europe and China after they had been corrupted by utilitarianism and the interests of financial capitalism (Gu, 1911: 14).<sup>15</sup> According to Gu, these interests had, to the detriment of Europe and China alike, elevated the industrialized

middle class to the standard bearer for materialism and radicalism (Gu, 1911: 44). In China's case, the solution was to retreat into tradition (Gu, 1911: 110). By tradition, Gu understood not only the nobility of the 'old' culture of the Manchu aristocracy prior to its present-day decline; tradition was, above all, also Confucianism, whose values Gu sought to promote in *China's Defence* as well as his many (and widely distributed) translations of the Confucian classics (Groppe, 2019). For Gu, Confucianism expressed values that were analogous to those that the West had abandoned in the name of modernity, and which stood in direct contrast to those espoused by classes that were driven by work, convenience, and unchecked consumption. As an antidote to both the modernized West and westernizing China, classical Confucianism was presented by Gu as a resource for restoring values that, in his view, had last been articulated in the West by Goethe, Carlyle, Arnold, and Emerson. In a footnote where Gu compared the 'crude' mentality of the Chinese literati of his day with that of the 'educated and civilized' classes who he regarded as seeking only to augment their own comfort and luxury, Gu drew a direct comparison between Confucius and Emerson, whom Gu quotes as saying that to live otherwise, that is, in strict moderation with a mind toward the 'common good', would be 'a kind of askesis' (Gu, 1911: 36).<sup>16</sup>

Gu's name does not reappear in any of Benjamin's writings. However, two years after first being introduced to Gu's ideas—specifically, the ideas that the West is caught up in an internal struggle against its decline, and that 'a kind of askesis' might be retrieved from Chinese thought as an antidote—, Benjamin apparently composes a response to them in the form of an epigraph to an unfinished essay he titled 'Metaphysics of Youth' (GS 2: 91-104). The epigraph consists in a passage taken not from one of Confucius' writings, however, but from §80 of the *Daodejing* in the translation by the German missionary and sinologist Richard Wilhelm, who had also translated Gu (Laozi, 1911). Included at the beginning of a section called 'The Diary', Benjamin's excerpt reads as follows:

Nachbarländer mögen in Sehweite liegen,  
daß man den Ruf der Hähne und Hunde gegenseitig hören kann:  
und doch sollten die Leute im höchsten Alter sterben,  
ohne hin und her gereist zu sein (Laozi, 1911: 85; cited in GS 2: 96).

(Neighboring lands may lie within visual range [i.e. so near] that one can hear one another's  
cocks and dogs call; yet the people should grow old and die without having travelled there  
and back. — My translation from Wilhelm's German.)

In their original context in the *Daodejing* §80, to which Wilhelm gives the heading  
'Selbstständigkeit' (Self-Reliance), these lines complete a verse that begins with the  
recommendation to a ruler to govern in such a way that people do not need to move to  
'neighboring lands':

Mag das Land klein sein und wenig Leute haben.  
Laß es zehnerlei oder hunderterlei Geräte haben,  
ohne sie zu gebrauchen.  
Laß die Leute den Tod wichtignehmen  
und nicht in die Ferne schweifen.  
Ob auch Schiffe und Wagen vorhanden wären,  
sei niemand, der darin fahre.  
Ob auch Wehr und Waffen da wären,  
sei niemand, der sie entfalte.  
Laß die Leute wieder Knoten aus Stricken knüpfen

und sie gebrauchen statt der Schrift.

Mach' süß ihre Speise

und schön ihre Kleidung,

friedlich ihre Wohnung

und fröhlich ihre Sitten (Laozi, 1911: 85).

(A land may be small and its inhabitants few. Let it have ten times or a hundred times more instruments without their being used. Let the people take death seriously and not wander off into the distance. There might be ships and carriage, but no one would travel in them. There might be weapons, but no one would deploy them. Let the people knot ropes again and use that instead of writing. Make their food palatable, their clothing fine, their home peaceful and their customs joyful. — My translation from Wilhelm's German.)

In Wilhelm's translation, the ruler secures contentment by ensuring that the people do not do a number of things—they do not use tools that might increase their efficiency, they do not use notation other than 'knots'. As far as the people are concerned, 'no one' would travel or pursue conflict; 'no one' would give up home and custom to die in a distant land. And the ruler achieves this by delimiting the size of their land and population—that is, by calculating that the people 'do not do' what they do not do *in toto*, such that, of all the people, 'no one' does *in fine*. What this expresses in the German is a startling reinterpretation of the concept of *wu wei*, or non-action, which had been interpreted by Weber via de Groot as a principle of quietistic yielding to an unchanging and mystical natural order. Wilhelm's rendition of §80 of the *Daodejing*, by comparison, recasts *wu wei* as a strategy for happiness; non-action is a principle for attaining contentment by eschewing use, (self-)amplification, the exertion of force, and even extension itself. Yet the world has not been rejected; it lies nearby, 'within

visual range', in *Sehweite*. *Wu wei* here is rendered as an orientation to the world that is radically critical of all its manners of having and striving, and therefore beautiful, peaceful and content. In this vision of Daoist perfection, being at one with the unplanned and unpurposive is fundamental.

In the section of the 'Metaphysics of Youth' which follows this epigraph, Benjamin takes this interpretation a step further. Benjamin first reproduces the ruler's calculation by reducing the size and extent of the land to just one—the 'I'—on whom Benjamin pins the despair of the 'youth' which has lost the 'medium in which [its] melody was to swell' to 'calendar time, clock time, and stock-exchange time': in a word, to a 'life' lived inadequately as a prisoner of time emptied even of the 'filled silence in which his later greatness was to have matured'. Caught up in the all-consuming presence of everyday events, chance occurrences and obligations, the 'I' loses the 'youthful and immortal time of thousandfold opportunities' to the serial progression of the days and seconds. Then, in response to this condition of 'despair' in which he finds youth, Benjamin makes a radical proposal: the one who is in such a condition of despair should look down into the 'current' from which they emerged and 'lose, slowly, finally and redemptively, their comprehension'. It is out of this 'forgetting' that the 'diary' emerges. In response to the loss of the time of thousandfold opportunities and the time of maturation to the emptiness of having and striving, the youth, according to Benjamin, should keep a diary, the act of which, he writes, will 'transform' all that has been inadequately lived into something 'perfected' and 'completed', in the sense of being 'brought to an end [*Vollendet*]' (GS 2: 97).

Herein Benjamin can be seen to radically depart from Wilhelm but also Gu. Gu had recommended a return to tradition as an antidote to modern, middle-class 'pseudo-liberalism'. Benjamin, by contrast, finds in the act of diarizing 'an act of liberation, secret and limitless in its victory' because it will have discovered in its 'perfection' of life a 'life that has

never been lived [*eines nie gelebten Lebens*]. The diary, the ‘book of life in whose time everything that we inadequately lived is transformed into the perfected-completed’, is an ‘abyssal book of a life that has never been lived’ because in its act of recounting all the ways in which the self consumes itself in its desires, willing, lust for power, idleness, and however else self-consumption occurs under the regime of ‘calendar time, clock time, and stock-exchange time’, another ‘I’ emerges altogether to whom none of this has happened because it is, precisely, the no one who has not consumed itself in ‘calendar time, clock time, and stock-exchange time’ (GS 2: 97). Benjamin describes this no one’s ‘perfection’ in terms of ‘interval-distances’ [*Abstände*] into which the ‘I’ ‘plunges’ headlong into the very thing that had been oppressing it: intervals of ‘pure time’, which, far from being an ideal form or a vehicle for progressive development, ‘suspends’ the ‘I’ by irradiating time as such through it, thereby ensuring that ‘nothing can befall’ it. Holding, intensifying, and releasing no one’s ‘perfection’ all at once, the ‘interval-distance’ transforms life lived inadequately into the way life happened to have not occurred.

Benjamin’s ‘interval-distances’ or *Abstände* thus draw attention to a minimal world-affirmation still discernible in Wilhelm’s ‘visual range’ (*Sehweite*) and transform it into a much more rigorous ‘kind of askesis’ as the antidote to capitalist contemporaneity: whereas *Sehweite* keeps the world at proximity and maintains the assimilation to the nonpurposive and unplanned as ineluctable and minimally, even if barely, perfectible, the *Abstand* holds off the world and its things in perfection, as a consequence of which no ‘I’ acts, nothing is used up in time, and the ‘self’ in its ‘perfection’ exists ‘in assembly [*versammelt*]’ with ‘all things’ (perhaps an equivalent to the *wan wu*). The ‘perfection’ of these interval-distances—their transformation of the life inadequate into life as it was never lived—thus expresses the state in which the ‘I’ manages to generate the ‘power [*Kraft*]’ to ‘befall things’ rather than have them befall it, and thereby to ‘misrecognize its own fate’; ‘no catastrophe’, Benjamin writes,

‘finds a way into the lines of this book’ (GS 2: 98). Gu had asserted that every civilization contains the immanent law of its own demise. Benjamin transposes this law into a principle of non-action that reconfigures the course of time itself and, with it, the very destination of a life.

#### IV. Friendliness

As developed in ‘Metaphysics of Youth’, Benjamin’s early theory of non-action as the misrecognition of fate contained the beginnings of several approaches he subsequently takes with respect to the broader question of how to comprehend no one’s actions. Non-action indicated to Benjamin how the temporal-social sequence by which beings are linked to one another in a chain of interconnected debts and destinies is sorely inadequate for grasping anything remotely approximating the ‘good’ in nature. This is especially evident in another text Benjamin composed around 1921 where the idea that a ‘life never lived’ may have the ‘power’ to ‘misrecognize fate’ reappears. Near the end of ‘Toward the Critique of Violence’, Benjamin discusses the instance of ‘violence’ that does not atone a guilt but rather eliminates the entire apparatus of inculcation and expiation: a ‘pure divine violence’ in respect to ‘mere natural life’, which as God’s ‘striking’ of Korach and his co-conspirators illustrates, ‘de-expiates’ the guilty without warning, but also leaves the children of Korach to live on (Benjamin, 2021: 57). In contrast to ‘mythic violence’, which inculcates then expiates mere natural life and so ‘releases legal violence’ (Benjamin, 2021: 57) (as demonstrated by Niobe, who insults the gods and sees her children killed, after which she is turned into ‘an eternal, mute bearer of guilt’ (GS 2: 55) marking the boundary between human and gods; Niobe’s mourning permanently indexes the establishment of law and its production-perpetuation of guilty life), divine violence ‘de-expiates’ by ‘annihilating’ the positing of law and the lethal violence its concept of causality exacts (Benjamin, 2021: 57). Judgments on life are decided

without relying on or producing new law and new guilt; there cannot be a normative basis for the commandment ‘thou shalt not kill’ that extends to the very ‘soul of the living’ and ‘inculcates’ life as sacrificeable life that also serves justice (Benjamin, 2021: 58). For Benjamin, we must be rid of the notion that debt-guilt should be a structuring principle for our relation to the earth and to one another; so long as there is indebted life, there is no possibility of justice.

By extension, non-sacrificeable life is thinkable only where ‘the nonbeing of the human being’, that is the reduction of the human being to mere sacrificeable life for the sake of their soul, is considered ‘more terrible than the ... not-yet-being of the just human being’ (Benjamin, 2021: 59). This, according to Benjamin, would be where the ‘latest aberration of a weakened Western tradition’, namely the ‘dogma of the sanctity of life’—the dogma that mere natural life is sacred and therefore inculcated—no longer replaces something the West ‘had lost in cosmologically impenetrable things’ (Benjamin, 2021: 59). As ‘Capitalism as Religion’ specifies, this place is where no one stands who falls within the net of inculcation and net productivity. From the late 1920s to the 1930s, Benjamin returned frequently to unsacrificeable life—of life never lived in creation—and its capacity to ‘misrecognize fate’, of which one moment deserves particular mention. In an essay entitled ‘An Outlook into Children’s Books’ (1926), Benjamin reprises a series of thoughts he initiated around 1920-21 on the relation of the human body to that which it cannot produce itself—color—and to which it can therefore only relate in terms of pure receptivity (GS 4: 609).<sup>17</sup> Referring to a claim made by the sinologist August Pfizmaier that according to the ancient Chinese theory of painting, the verb *hua*, ‘to paint’, was synonymous with *gua*, ‘to hang’ (Pfizmaier, 1871: 164), Benjamin notes that the same ambiguity regarding the use of things (colors) to which we do not relate as creators, the ambiguity that exists between use and the decreation of the user in the very process of that use, also found resonance in the German expression *die*

*Farben anlegen*, meaning to apply or, literally, to ‘lay on’ colors. ‘In such a color-hung, undense world in which everything shifts with each step taken’, Benjamin continues, ‘the child is received as a fellow actor [*Mitspieler*]’ in the painting (GS 4: 609). Accordingly, painting undoes our subjecthood just as use decreates the user: in its encounter with the picture, not only do things ‘not ... step out’ of the pages to meet the ‘picturing’ child but the child in its ‘viewing [*im Schauen*]’ is itself absorbed into the page, ‘satiating itself, like a cloud, with the color-sheen of the image-world’ (GS 4: 609).

For Benjamin, children’s books thus recall an affinity with the ‘art of Daoist perfection [*des Vollendeten*]’: sitting before the illustrated book, he writes, the child ‘masters the illusory wall of the [page’s] surface and passes between colored textures and bright partitions to enter a stage on which the fairy tale lives’ (GS 4: 609). The ‘art of Daoist perfection’ here entails a purely receptive correspondence to an unplanned ‘disorder’ of things that unmakes the times and spaces of human production and consumption; in the case of color, the human body is not met with things (that ‘befall’ it as objects for its picture-consumption) but instead joins a world in which it ‘acts with [*tut mit*]’ and ‘within [*mitten inne*]’ a ‘masquerade’ where ‘everything shifts with each step taken’ (GS 4: 609). In this world there is no reification of potential, no re-entrenchment of a dialectic of subject and object but, rather, a disordering of the transactions between them driven by the power differentials inhering in material, even bodily reality: the child ‘masters’ the page’s surface, ‘with each step taken’ relations are recalibrated. Not even ‘*Sinn*’—‘meaning’, ‘direction’, but also the *dao* in Wilhelm’s translation of the *Daodejing*—reimposes order here, as ‘acting with’ only ‘does’ what ‘undoes’ striving for satiety as the principle for continuing existence. Indeed, such a ‘view’ considers non-existence not as dissonance at the edges of human autonomy but as the baseline of all activity. It dislodges the viewpoint of human production and consumption in favor of extinction as the criterion for determining the ‘*Sinn*’ of material,

bodily and political activity. Instead of an analytics based on fulfilling human wants and needs, or calculations remaining within human means and individual choice, the ‘art of Daoist perfection’ specifies non-existence as ‘acting-with’ all things and reorients action around a reality catastrophic for all conceivable life.

Years later, Benjamin gives to this non-activity the name ‘friendliness’. In his 1939 commentary on Brecht’s poetry, Benjamin reserves his final comment for Brecht’s poem on the ‘Legend’ of Laozi, who, he notes, happens to leave behind his ‘wisdom’ at the behest of the final gatekeeper he encounters before embarking on his exile. Laozi did not ‘produce’ the *Daodejing*, it had to be ‘torn from’ [*entreißen*] him; out of an auspicious inquiry and above all ‘friendliness’, the textual basis for the ‘art of Daoist perfection’ happens to be left to posterity (GS 2: 570). What Benjamin calls ‘friendliness’ has nothing to do with intimacy, cordiality, or even proximity, however; it dispenses itself only to those who are entitled to it (GS 2: 570). It does not occupy itself with what is small but instead achieves the greatest things as though they were small. Above all, ‘friendliness’ does not abolish but rather ‘brings to life’ the ‘interval-distance’ [*Abstand*] between human beings. Here, too, *Abstand* holds off in order to establish non-proximity: Brecht’s Laozi, Benjamin writes, does something great ‘for’ the gatekeeper, but not ‘with’ him; similarly, he himself does not hand over the eighty-one chapters of the *Daodejing* himself, but has his boy do it (GS 2: 571). Here, too, *Abstand* intensifies beings in their perfection: ‘the classic writers, an ancient Chinese philosopher once said, lived in the bloodiest and darkest times and were the friendliest and most cheerful people one ever saw’ (GS 2: 571). Indeed, Benjamin writes, referring to another of Brecht’s poems, ‘Von der Freundlichkeit der Welt’ (On the friendliness of the world), the world shows us exactly three ‘friendlinesses’—swaddling at birth, a helping hand in childhood, a few handfuls of earth on the grave. Countenanced with such ‘perfection’, what disposition other than ‘cheerfulness’ could one adopt?

‘Cheerfulness’, the disposition in which ‘friendliness’ manifests, must therefore be understood as ‘the minimal program of humanity’ (GS 2: 572). Benjamin finds a formulation thereof in Brecht’s poem on Laozi: ‘Du verstehst, das Harte unterliegt’ (you understand, what is hard succumbs). The poem was written at a time, he says, when the verse might have sounded like a promise, but ‘today’ it also contains a ‘teaching’: a minimal program for action out of cheerfulness. This ‘teaching’ takes the form of two lines:

Daß das weiche Wasser in Bewegung

Mit der Zeit den mächtigen Stein besiegt (Brecht, cited in GS 2: 572)

(That soft water in movement / defeats with time the powerful stone)

They, in turn, rework several pivotal lines in the *Daodejing*’s account of disposition, potential, and the action of non-action. In Wilhelm’s translation:

Daß Schwaches das Starke besiegt

und Weiches das Harte besiegt,

weiß jedermann auf Erden,

aber niemand vermag danach zu handeln. (Laozi, 1911, §78)

(That the weak defeats the strong / And the soft defeats the hard / Is known by everyone on earth, but no one has the capacity to act accordingly. — My translation from Wilhelm’s German.)

In Brecht's version, the way of water that Wilhelm sets out in two statements of fact shifts the tense of the verb *besiegen* (defeat) almost imperceptibly from the present indicative to the future—'the soft defeats the hard' to 'the soft water (will) defeat(s) the powerful stone with time'—, raising the possibility of a transformation of the cheerful disposition from promise to program, from acquiescence to action. In calling cheerfulness a 'minimal program', Benjamin draws attention to its stark contrast to that other 'indubitable minimal program' he referenced in 'Toward the Critique of Violence': Kant's 'categorical imperative' to 'act in such a way that at all times you use the humanity in your person as well as in the person of all others as an end, and never merely as a means' (Benjamin, 2021: 46). For Benjamin, Kant's 'minimal program' fails to launch an effective critique of legal violence as such because it in fact spreads legal violence to all ends of the earth: 'For positive law ... will definitely claim to recognize and promote the interest of humanity in the person of every individual. Positive law sees this interest in the presentation and conservation of a fateful order' (Benjamin, 2021: 46). The categorical imperative's indeterminacy enables it to inculcate 'all' things living or not by drawing them into the orbit of 'humanity'. Brecht's 'minimal program', by contrast, proposes cheerfulness as an antidote to just such a 'fateful order'; its *dao* is a way out of capitalist religion's 'world condition of despair' (Benjamin, 2021: 90) by means of an intensification of 'perfection' that, without transacting on an end to its earthly interim, allows the order of that which has been without form or being within the time of capital to be thought in their dis-appearance and trans-formation of it. 'The materialistic dialectician', Benjamin writes, 'will thereby think of the matter [*Sache*] of the oppressed. (This is an inconspicuous matter for the rulers, a sober one for the oppressed and, in respect to its consequences, the most inexhaustible-undefeatable [*unversieglich*])' (GS 2: 572).

‘Friendliness’ is a ‘minimal program for humanity’ because it releases ‘no one’ from the ‘capacity’—and demand—‘to act accordingly’: the softness of water overcomes hardness from a place that yields to the inconstant and mutating aspect of things, from which all things owed will be prone—indeed, fated—to misrecognition. Whatever conclusion Benjamin drew from this ‘minimal program’ for the ‘present day’—particularly its political economy—he leaves unsaid. ‘Friendliness’, he says however, ‘brings to life’ ‘the interval-distance’ [*Abstand*] between people: in this interval, the one might ‘befall’ the other, but no one recognizes what anyone owed to the next, and no one manages to live outside the net in which we all stand.

#### V. Conclusion—No One Left

In light of the broadly recognized need for ontological transformations in our era of human-made natural catastrophe, Benjamin’s ‘minimal program’ seems of a piece with efforts such as Bennett’s and Dufourmantelle’s to take inspiration from ‘Chinese tradition’ and formulate alternative accounts of human-nonhuman interactions as far removed as imaginable from the capitalist existence to which we have been forced to acclimatize. For Bennett, attending to ‘congregational agency’ raises the possibility of a non-ontotheological conception of politics that incorporates ‘actions’ by nonhuman agents into our consideration of contemporary consumer capitalism. For Dufourmantelle, ‘gentleness’ engages not only cognitively but metaphysically with change as a mode of givenness, allowing precarity and counter-authoritarian possibilities to disrupt neoliberal ideologies of productivity and consumption. Yet both assume that ‘nature’ never acts with catastrophically deleterious effects for human life, only with a ‘vitality’ (Bennett) or ‘maturation’ (Dufourmantelle) that are cherished as resources for human-moral considerations. Even in its ‘self-deployment for disaggregation’ (Dufourmantelle), nature facilitates human-normative ends that are attainable

through acquiescence or harmonization with its transformations. As a review of Jullien's own coinage of the term shows, 'silent transformation' is an ideation, mobilized for the purpose of projecting an image of stability for elite politics by means of incorporating perceived problematic elements of economic experimentalism and entrepreneurship into official policy.

Rather than exploit 'China' as a natural resource, 'friendliness' proceeds from the premise that negativities such as precarity are categorizations already accounted for in capitalism's calculus of net productivity, the index of which is the debt economy. Benjamin's 'minimal program' is not principally concerned with normative ambivalences but with grasping enchanted matter as an ideation motivated by a political-economic interest to exit material reality altogether. Weber showed that capitalism emerges where debt-guilt and the need for its expiation are produced; for Benjamin, capitalism therefore sustains itself on the hope of seizing the entire earth in its logic of debt-guilt, betting with the end of the world to keep the world in a permanently catastrophic turn. In response, Benjamin proposes to extricate life from the destiny of capital by catastrophizing catastrophe capitalism itself, leaving no one: no one who by nature's patterns owes life to the sustenance of a liveable earth, no one who is naturally exploitable as a resource, no one whose disproportionate suffering from the effects of Anthropogenic change can be regarded as natural justice. Aware of China as the political and philosophical contemporary of a 'West' itself in the throes of epochal change, Benjamin articulates a theory of sustainability from the position of its global, material entanglement with a nature in which no one lives, nearly a century before Jullien would give it the name nonontology. This is nature that politics can remake in the image of a body acting in concert with all things, one whose material needs are already met, its fate misrecognized.

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<sup>1</sup> Besides the footnote in *The Propensity of Things* and the mention in *Les transformations silencieuses*, Jullien also devotes a lengthy exegesis to the withdrawal and rehabilitation of Deng in *Detour and Access* (2000): 24-27.

<sup>2</sup> I refer particularly to the concept of *tian xia* (all-under-heaven), which has been deployed of late by scholars and politicians to express China's idea of a universal moral order prior to modern Western impact, made a key element in the reinvention of Chinese agency and historiography (which, like Jullien, celebrates reformist continuity with the pre-revolutionary world order over revolutionary rupture), but, tellingly, only glossed in passing as 'global' by Jullien (see Chapters 4 and 6 of Jullien, 2009a). 'To move from a strategic usage of the concept of silent transformation to its political vocation', Jullien writes, 'it suffices, the

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Chinese tell us, to alter the scale: to deploy this transformation no longer for individual profit ... but for the profit of the world' (Jullien, 2009a: 188). 'The world', Jullien leaves unspoken, refers of course to East and West alike as beneficiaries of the 'Chinese dream' of universal harmony uniting all things under heaven (*tian xia* or *tian xia wan wu*).

<sup>3</sup> Similar criticisms have been mounted against the so-called new materialisms and especially Bennett's work over the years; see for instance Lemke (2018), who argues that Bennett replaces political considerations with an individualist and voluntarist ethics.

<sup>4</sup> The English translation renders the title of this sequel as *The Religion of China*, which is the translator's extrapolation from Weber's tendency to view both Confucianism and Daoism, despite any other differences, as a unified ethos when contrasted with Protestantism. I am using the translation of the original German title as Benjamin knew it.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Barbalet's recent book *Confucianism and the Chinese Self* has made this argument in some detail while situating Weber's interpretive choices in the context of the sources on China he made use of and his familiarity with the politics of China and colonial Germany just after the turn of the twentieth century. See especially Barbalet, 2017: 29ff.

<sup>6</sup> This expression is taken from a passage in Weber's essay on Hinduism and Buddhism where he summarizes his important finding from his essay on Chinese religion.

<sup>7</sup> At the outset of his book, de Groot claims that the consolidation of the Classics into the political constitution occurred during the Han Dynasty, during which the young empire, faced with the need to organize an enormous and newly unified territory, incorporated the religious elements of the ancient literature into a new State religion (Confucianism) and produced a canon of rules and organization principles henceforth handed down to subsequent dynasties. (De Groot, 1912: 5)

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<sup>8</sup> As Barbalet shows, the idea that Confucianism was an official cult of the Chinese state akin to a monotheism, in comparison to which all other creeds were heterodox, was an interpretation that originated with the Jesuit missionaries (Barbalet, 2017: 25).

<sup>9</sup> In the section elaborating on how ‘behaving as the Universe behaves is adaptation to the Universe, and as the Universe is supremely good, imitation of it is virtue’ (de Groot, 1912: 48), de Groot attributes the ‘perfect orderliness’ of this arrangement to ‘compliance’, the ‘political dogma on which peculiar stress is laid by Confucian Classics and other Taoist books’ (de Groot, 1912: 51-2).

<sup>10</sup> In a brief bibliographic section contained in the fragment on ‘Capitalism as Religion’, Benjamin lists the ‘1919-1920’ edition of Weber’s *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* and indicates that it consists of ‘2 vols’. The 1920 volume of the *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion* contains the revised second editions of both *The Protestant Ethic* and *Confucianism and Daoism*, which first appeared in separate instalments in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (20 [1904]: 1-54; 21 [1905]: 1-110; and 41 [1915]: 30-87, 335-386). The dates Benjamin gives correspond with the publication date of volume 1 of the *Collected Essays*; in referring to ‘2 vols.’, he may have been thinking of its inclusion of both *The Protestant Ethic* and *Confucianism and Daoism*. (The second volume of the *Collected Essays*, which contains *Hinduismus und Buddhismus*, appeared in 1921.) The second edition of *The Protestant Ethic* only differs by about 15% from the first edition—Weber himself says of the second edition ‘that I have not deleted, altered, or weakened *a single sentence* that contains anything of objective and essential importance from my essay’ (Weber, 1920: 17-18 n.1)—and the most important alteration consists in a new preface (‘Vorbemerkung,’ in Weber, 1920: 1-16) that reformulates his concept of capitalism. Meanwhile, scholars (Schluchter, 1989; Huang, 1994) have pointed out that the first and second editions of *Confucianism and Daoism* differ mainly

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in length caused by the insertion of footnotes and citations, and that they keep the original religious argument intact. In other words, Benjamin would have encountered the same argumentative distinction between *The Protestant Ethic* and *Confucianism and Daoism* as is evident between their respective first editions.

<sup>11</sup> Writing to Ernst Schoen in January 1919, Benjamin expresses misgivings about de Groot's application of a 'self-invented' title ('Universism') to a 'millenia-old religion' as well as his 'complete lack of vision [and] outdatedness', which Benjamin attributes to his 'complete enthrallment' with 'ancient China' (GB 2: 11). Much as there is 'worth knowing' in de Groot's book, Benjamin is vehemently critical of its 'ignorance of the new methodologies in the study of mythology', to which he had been introduced years earlier in the seminars of the Mesoamerican cultures specialist Walter Lehmann. Lehmann's inauguration of the 'new scientific area' of 'comparative mythology', which for Benjamin contained important insights into the very 'concept of historical existence' (GB 1: 299), proceeded from his discovery that the same glyph marked the zero-points of both the Aztec (solar) calendar and the older Mayan (lunar) calendar that had been assimilated by virtue of a 'transition', that is, conquest and radical reversal of the very order of elements in the cosmos. Lehmann, whose comparative study of calendrical systems extended to the Chinese lunar calendar as well, likely introduced de Groot's work to Benjamin. For an extensive account of Lehmann's influence on Benjamin's thinking on myth, history, and state, see my 'Afterword: Toward Another Critique of Violence' in *Benjamin*, 2021: 113-160.

<sup>12</sup> Weber first develops his 'ideal-type' conceptualization of modern rational capitalism—according to which indigenous elements can be identified as contributing to the optimal conditions for the emergence of a native capitalism—on the basis of his analysis of Chinese institutions in *Confucianism and Daoism* and comparison with those in early modern Protestant Europe.

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<sup>13</sup> In his account of a conversation in 1918 with Benjamin about myth and cosmogony, which was likely inspired by Benjamin's introduction to 'comparative mythology' by Walter Lehmann (see note 12 above), Scholem records the following remark by Benjamin: 'Myth's actual content is the tremendous revolution that, in its polemic against the spectral, brought the latter's epoch to an end' (Scholem, 1975: 80).

<sup>14</sup> Until recently, Gu tended to be interpreted as an advocate of a civilizational 'clash'. For a summary and refutation of such interpretations, see Müller, 2006: 2-4.

<sup>15</sup> As Müller (2006) and others have noted, Gu enjoyed a warm reception in Europe, and particularly in Germany, where his criticisms of pseudo-liberalism and materialism appealed to writers and thinkers who themselves were growing weary of the modernization project. This stood in stark contrast to his reception back in China, where Gu was seen as an eccentric and reactionary defender of traditional symbols, practices and values that, around 1911, were in the process of being overthrown along with the Qing dynasty. See Müller, 2006: 9; Groppe, 2019: 2.

<sup>16</sup> Throughout *China's Defence*, Gu intersperses his commentary on Western modernity with sayings by Confucius, and his observations of contemporaneous China with quotations from Western authors. As Groppe (2019) discusses in detail, Gu often also interspersed his translations with quotations from European and American authors as a way to convey the sense that Goethe, Confucius, Carlyle and Emerson, for instance, shared a system of values. See Groppe (2019), 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> These short texts belong with a complex of fragments concerning fantasy, color and phenomenology; see for instance GS 6: 123.

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