

**Being Valued by Birth:
A Comparison of Castes and Feudal Classes in India, Tibet, China, and Korea¹**

Timo Schmitz
University of Trier

Abstract: Karl Marx proposed that castes and feudal classes are both forms of the division of labor, with castes being hereditary in nature. In this paper, the author analyzes feudal class and caste through current and historical examples to investigate Marx's theory and to detect challenges in drawing parallels between both. As examples, the author takes the Hindu society of India, as a persistent caste system which is de facto still practiced today, and the historical Yi caste system and its remnants in China and compares them to the historical feudal societies of the Tibetans in China and the pre-modern Korean society of the Josŏn dynasty. The author then contrasts these societies with the class systems practiced in the neo-feudal DPRK and the post-feudal ROK.

Keywords: caste, class, feudalism, serfdom, labor division

“Human beings are not born free, they are born to free themselves”
– attributed to Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism²

Introduction

Since time immemorial, there have been regions on this globe which brought forth caste systems as a special form of class society, the most prominent being the Hindu caste system of India and Nepal. Marx and Engels “observed that the crude form of the division of labour found among the Indians called forth the caste system in their state and religion. They criticised the idealist belief that the caste system produced the crude form of division of labour” (Bapuji 2009, 340). Bapuji therefore explains correctly that for Marx, “the caste regime was also a particular division of labour [...] However, that division of labour is ‘hereditary’ in nature” (Bapuji 2009, 340). Therefore, castes are an expression of socio-economic relationships if we follow Marx's reading. And “Thus a revolt against caste is never simply a ‘cultural revolt’, can never be an attack purely at the cultural level, and requires the transformation of the relations

¹ I especially want to thank Norman Kenneth Swazo for giving me feedback on a previous draft which helped me to improve this paper. All citations from our communication are adopted with his permission.

² Quote taken from <http://www.religionspourlapaix.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=445>, retrieved on 29 June 2024.

of production” (Omvedt 1978, 70).³ However, due to the relatedness of castes and feudal classes,⁴ both can be compared with each other, since the major difference is, as we will see and as Marx already proposed, that castes are hereditary in nature while feudal classes are not. However, both are – as Marx already observed correctly – a division of labor. It will be interesting to investigate if there are other major differences between castes and classes in a feudal context, which challenge the possibility of drawing an immediate parallelism. Concerning classes, it has to be clear from the beginning, though, that “Class as a concept cannot exist in and of itself. It is an abstraction, used to understand processes, with a view to taking action based upon it” (Collier 2022, 2).

Concerning the Indian society, caste is not something common to every Indian per se, but specifically connected to Hinduism and its followers, and therefore not only a form of the division of labor, but Marx and Engels already criticized the Idealist belief which is inherited within the nature of the caste system. The spiritual notion therefore ought not to be underestimated, though Marx’s Historical Materialism focuses on the material aspect of labor as primary:

Marxist Materialism has frequently been distinguished from previous materialist doctrines by its introduction of practice, and, with it, history, into the concept. Auguste Cornu, Marx’s biographer, sees this practical perspective as the key to Marx’s break with Feuerbach, and his subsequent elaboration of a distinctive theoretical outlook. Yet even before this break, Marx had developed, largely in the 1844 manuscripts, his own concept of labor, derived in part from his critique of Hegel, in part from his readings in political economy. (Miller 1982, Part 1 Chapter 3)

Given that Hindu castes are on a spiritual level, one could argue that labor is also staged on a spiritual level here: one is born into a certain caste which inherits certain occupations having a certain societal rank, because of the social hierarchical order – a kind of natural cosmic order taught through the religious doctrines of Hinduism. Thus, since the consciousness of a karmic-based natural order comes before the aspect of labor, the Hindu society, therefore, one could argue, does not separate the activity of labor from spiritism. Or in other words: one could argue

³ As Ranganayakamma (2004) explains: “If we observe castes – even though superficially – we find certain obvious distinctions among them: that some castes are high and some are low. In what respect do we find this ‘high-low’ distinction? Generally speaking, all the upper castes are those which possess land, capital and money; those which have hegemony and engage in social organization and administration. Again, generally speaking, all the lower castes are those that do not have properties even as means of livelihood. They live as labourers and servants. They are subjected to the hegemony and ruling of the upper castes and live in dire poverty and social inferiority.” Thus, castes are rather drawn to a feudal organization and existed already in a pre-capitalist stage; however, unlike feudal classes in Europe, castes are hereditary in nature. The distinction that labor was not all the time in the same mode and thus the same form of division of labor (as Proudhon claimed) was brilliantly pointed out by Karl Marx in a reply on Annenkov’s letter about Proudhon’s *Philosophy of Poverty*: “But was not the caste regime also a particular division of labour? Was not the regime of the corporations another division of labour? And is not the division of labour under the system of manufacture, which in England begins about the middle of the seventeenth century and comes to an end in the last part of the eighteenth, also totally different from the division of labour in large-scale modern industry?” (cited after Ranganayakamma, 2004). On the division of labor in Marx’s *Capital*, see Marx 1918, 523-575. (Though it is usually assigned as Chapter 14 in most editions, the 1918 Yiddish edition (using the German Karl Kautsky edition as ground) places it as Chapter 12. Kautsky’s *Volksausgabe* was published in Stuttgart in 1914 by the J. H. W. Dietz Nachfolger Publishing House.) Chapter 26 might be interesting in this context as well. Both, Chapter 14 and Chapter 26 are available in English in the Marxists Internet Archive. Kautsky focuses in his 1912 explanatory work on *Capital* concerning the division of labor on the mode of capitalism and manufacturing (see Kautsky 1912, 143-151).

⁴ Feudal classes refer to the class relationships in a feudal society, while by using the term capitalist class, I refer to the class relationships in a capitalist society.

that the historical path of India is a deep-rooted Historical Idealism (due to the hereditary nature of the castes), an Idealism passed along from generation to generation.⁵ In contrast to that, Sikhs and Buddhists explicitly reject castes. For the Buddha Gautama, the Hindu society was the nucleus of suffering, and as every Hindu was assigned a rank which caused suffering, his being was already object to suffering from birth, or as Zeitlin puts it: “*dos dazayn in dos layden zenen bay budda`n sinonimen*” (Zeitlin 1910, 16; transliteration mine).⁶ However, this does not mean that religions other than Hinduism are necessarily completely free from influences of the caste system, even if they do not belong to any caste. For instance, as Singh (2015) explains: “The issue of caste in Sikhism is quite complex, always inviting a diversity of impassioned opinions. One thing we can be certain about is that Guru Gobind Singh had abolished all caste inequality with the inception of Khalsa on 13 April, 1699 and with the institution of Khanday-Ki-Pahul or the Baptism of Sword. Faithful Sikhs do not practice caste discrimination but this is not to say that all Sikhs necessarily act in accordance to their faith. Consequently, the caste does exist in Sikhism, though in a diluted form than found in the rest of Indian society.” And in Sri Lanka, there are still Buddhist castes today.

Concerning Hinduism, I could conduct a deep dive into Marxian religious critique, since it is a basic principle of Historical Materialism. However, as Machovec (1974, 39-40) argues, Marx’s materialism ought not to be understood as a *cult of materialism*, and thus not a *physicalism*, but as a critical response bound to its historical time and setting and thus not as an eternal atheism.⁷ Furthermore, I argue with Kliemann (1989, 32) that Marx’s criticism was justified as the church did not side with the oppressed in the 19th century in Germany, but backed the oppression of the ruling class, thus Christians have to be thankful to Marx for pointing out this very unholy relationship. In a society where state and church are fully separated, the question of whether one adheres to a religion or not is a personal choice, and as such, no problem.⁸ I would argue, even, that religion can be helpful in overcoming oppression. The teaching of Jesus, for instance, aims at creating a classless society in which everyone is an equal brother or sister, independent of race, sex, status, etc. and the early Christians who followed Jesus shared everything with each other (Acts 4:32-35). Unlike many contemporaries, Jesus also reached out his hand to discriminated minorities, such as the Samaritans, as well as societal outcasts (cp. Luke 10:27-37, Mark 1:41-24). As such, I do not think that religious teaching is a problem; the problem is religious institutions that distance themselves from the humble teaching and enrich themselves for their own benefit. In this paper I would therefore like to focus on the social component in relation to Hinduism, namely the element of coercion and thus collective oppression, just as Karl Marx probably took the clerical influence on society

⁵ Though Idealism itself is not problematic, as the dispute between Idealism and Materialism turns around the question whether consciousness or matter comes first, which is a legitimate question. If consciousness comes first, of course, this gives space for the possibility of the existence of a divine being, e.g. a God, and thus religion, which is also unproblematic in the first place and legitimate.

⁶ English translation: “Being and suffering are synonyms for the [historical] Buddha.”

⁷ See also Zademach’s (1974, 40-41) argument on why Marx’s religious critique is bound to its specific time and not eternally true, as well as Post’s (1974, 42-44) anti-critique of the Marxist religious critique.

⁸ The question whether Idealism or Materialism is the true approach is as old as philosophy itself. In fact, I do not see Marx’s materialism as the final paradigm and argue that religion and Idealist philosophy in general are no obstacles for the Socialist cause. The only difference is that they explain the origin of the world in a different way, with the one side placing matter first and the other side placing consciousness first. But as Machovec has already observed, there are more urgent questions today than finding an ultimate answer to what was at the beginning. (I do not think that the question is uninteresting and irrelevant per se, as it helps us in understanding the world, but in a political context, and especially, in securing laborers’ rights, the question whether the universe is a created one or not does not have a priority. And as it is a question which helps us understand the world, but since there is not the one and only answer, it is important to respect different views and encourage pluralism, instead of a specific “final” dogma.)

as a whole and the collective coercion resulting from it as the starting point of his criticism. On the other hand, a religious life that is based on voluntariness does not harm any fellow human being; on the contrary, it can be seen as a source of inspiration in the class struggle.⁹ The aim of this paper thus is not to dive into the religious intermingling of castes in India, but rather to show the nature of feudal classes and castes. This shall be done through a comparative approach, taking the Hindu religion of India, the Yi and Tibetan societies of China, and the premodern Korean society as well as the modern societies of the DPRK and the ROK as examples. Finally, it should already be said in advance that while the Tibetans and Yi in China as well as the Koreans in the ROK overcame their feudal past, though there are still remnants of that time in the society of the Yi and in the ROK,¹⁰ the caste system is still overall present in Hindu societies, such as India and Nepal. As such, when I explain the situation in India, I will focus on the social dimension of castes and whether there is a chance for change in that particular country.

Caste System in Hinduism

Caste as a unifying element of Hindu religion

Hinduism is generally regarded to be the main religion in India. Though this is not wrong, it is important to add that it is not one religion with several heterogeneous denominations, such as Catholicism and Protestantism within Christianity, but rather an umbrella term for many religious practices which originated in India and are native in local areas of the subcontinent but embracing the same canon and traditions.¹¹ Thus, it should be no surprise that Hinduism is extremely manifold in its appearance (cp. Glasenapp 1922, 7-8). As Glasenapp points out:

Trotz der Tatsache, daß die Hindus etwa ein Siebentel der Menschheit ausmachen, ist die Mehrzahl der Gebildeten über keine Religion so mangelhaft unterrichtet, wie gerade über ihn. Dies liegt einmal daran, daß er keine eigentliche Weltreligion ist, sondern sein Wirkungsfeld (wenn ich von den indischen Niederlassungen in Ost-Asien, Ost- und Süd-Afrika, Amerika und Australien absehe) auf Indien beschränkt, und hat sodann und vor allem seinen Grund darin, daß er sich von den genannten drei Religionen und den meisten anderen in eigenartiger Weise unterscheidet. [...] Man kann von ihm in dieser

⁹ I do not want to miss giving some historical examples of Christian Socialists, advocating a social gospel and the promotion of an authentic Christianity (as in the past, some Christian denominations in the West rather focused on their own benefit, instead of focusing fully on the community, the commoners, and making them their center of activity). These Christian Socialists included Ding Guangxun (1915-2012), Wu Yaozong (1893-1979), Zhao Zizhen (1888-1979), Jiang Changchuan (1884-1958), Zhao Fusan (1926-2015), and Deng Yuzhi (1900-1996). It is noteworthy that Deng Yuzhi took her Christian faith as main source of activity and at the same time supported the Communist Party of China in the anti-Imperialist struggle. The most famous signee of the *Christian Manifesto* known abroad is probably Ni Tuosheng, also known as Watchman Nee, who was martyred in 1972. Concerning Buddhism, famous Buddhist Socialists include the 10th Panchen Lama Lobsang Chökyi Gyaltsen (1938-1989) who was a member of the Communist Party of China, the former Prime minister of Burma U Nu (1907-1995), former Indian Minister of Law and Justice B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), as well as Han Yong-un (1879-1944), Inoue Shuten (1880-1945) and Uchiyama Gudo (1874-1911).

¹⁰ In contrast to the ROK, the DPRK is a neo-feudalist state today.

¹¹ The fact that Jainism and Buddhism originated in India might be one of the reasons that they are counted as Hinduism in the State of India. Buddhism, despite having its own canon, is often classified as *nastika*, i.e. nihilist tradition, within Hinduism in India. Sikhism, however, successfully fought to be recognized as an own teaching.

Hinsicht nicht als von einer einheitlichen Religion reden, sondern muß geradezu von einer Enzyklopädie der gesamten Religionskunde sprechen. (1922, 6,7)^{12 13}

One element ascribed to Hinduism, however, seems to be a unifying element:

It is a curious fact, then, that there is a near-unanimous consensus that caste and Hinduism are inextricably linked. A statement cited in the opening pages of Lipner's textbook on Hinduism might well have come from Weber or any of his intellectual descendants whose interpretations of caste have dominated intellectual discussion of the subject in the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology: "Caste is the Hindu form of social organization. No man can be a Hindu who is not in caste." (Quigley 2003, 495)

But Quigley (2003, 495) also informs us that Lipner "reminds us that there is a dissenting, minority view which states that one must be very careful" in doing such an equation. However, what was Weber's position on castes? "Weber identified India's caste structure to be 'fundamental,' even 'essential,' to the Hindu religion and thus to the self-understanding of Indian society" (Swazo 2022, 23). Thus, I would argue that this is why castes cannot be "seen as an entrenched social crisis," as proposed by Ayyathurai (5 July 2021), since "the *ethos* of a 'crisis' suggests a temporary departure from the norm, not a permanent state of affairs" (Ugalde 2024, 74).

The origin of the caste system in India: Was Marx right?

There have been various attempts to explain how the caste system came into being. The main question was whether the caste system was man-made or of divine nature. Now if the castes were developed by a law-giver, then they could be regarded as a human failure and might be corrected at any time. However, if they were propagated as a spiritual truth, then they would not be that easy to change, because humans are subjugated to the Divine. Concerning the first option, Ambedkar wrote:

Every country has its law-giver, who arises as an incarnation (avatar) in times of emergency to set right a sinning humanity and give it the laws of justice and morality. Manu, the law-giver of India, if he did exist, was certainly an audacious person. If the story that he gave the law of caste be created, then Manu must have been a dare-devil fellow and the humanity that accepted his dispensation must be a humanity quite different from the one we are acquainted with. It is unimaginable that the law of caste was *Given*. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Manu could not have outlived his law, for what is that class that can submit to be degraded to the status of brutes by the pen of a man, and suffer him to raise another class to the pinnacle? Unless he was a tyrant who

¹² English translation: "Despite the fact that Hindus make up at about a seventh of all people on Earth, the majority of educated people are not as poorly informed about any religion as they are about this one. It is due to the fact that Hinduism is not actually a world religion, but rather its field of activity (if I disregard the Indian branches in East Asia, East and South Africa, America and Australia) is limited to India, and above all, its reason is that it differs in a strange way from the three religions mentioned and most others. [...] One cannot speak of it as a unified religion in this respect, but rather as an encyclopedia of the entire study of religion." (translation mine)

¹³ Cp. also Neubert, who writes on the assumption that "there is no such thing as 'Hinduism'. This is why a number of scholars instead speak of Hindu religions (Stietencron 2000) or Hindu religious traditions" (2010, 57).

held all the population in subjection it cannot be imagined that he could have been allowed to dispense his patronage in this grossly unjust manner, as may be easily seen by a mere glance at his “Institutes.” (n.d., 20-21)

However, Ambedkar himself argues against this option that a law-giver would be the source of the caste system:

One thing I want to impress upon you is that Manu did not *Give the law* of Caste and that he could not do so. Caste existed long before Manu. He was an upholder of it and therefore philosophised about it, but certainly he did not and could not ordain the present order of Hindu Society. His work ended with the codification of existing caste rules and the preaching of Caste *dharma*. The spread and growth of the Caste system is too gigantic, a task to be achieved by the power or cunning of an individual or of a class. Similar in argument is the theory that the Brahmans created the Caste. After what I have said regarding Manu, I need hardly say anything more, except to point out that it is incorrect in thought and malicious in intent. (n.d., 21)

In the same way, Ambedkar rejects the shastras to be the main source of the caste system:

There is a strong belief in the mind of orthodox Hindus that the Hindu Society was somehow moulded into the frame work of the Caste System and that it is an organization consciously created by the *Shastras*. Not only does this belief exist, but it being justified on the ground that it cannot but be good, because it is ordained by the *Shastras* and the *Shastras* cannot be wrong. I have urged so much on the adverse side of this attitude, not because the religious sanctity is grounded on scientific basis, nor to help those reformers who are preaching against it. Preaching did not make the caste system neither will it unmake it. (n.d., 21-22)

With this notion, Ambedkar shows the very problem in a nutshell and I also argue that a plain criticism will not undo the caste system, as long as there is not a mass movement by the people. Nonetheless, as we will see later, there are many people who did not want to swallow the injustice imposed by the ruling class and higher classes. It is noteworthy that already Marx came to the conclusion that castes cannot be a result of a lawgiver, but must have been codified in another way: “According to Marx (1867: 321), the tendency of earlier societies was to make trades hereditary either to ‘petrify’ them into castes (as in India) or to ‘ossify’ them into exclusive guilds (as in Egypt). Marx (1846-47: 118) observes that the division of labour under the caste system was according to ‘fixed rules.’ These rules were not ‘established’ by a legislator. He further observes that these rules were originally born of the conditions of material production and were raised to the status of laws only much later” (Bapuji 2009, 341). We can clearly see that Marx was right that castes are the result of a division of labor, because the classification mirrors different occupations. As such, the four Vedic classifications of caste (*varna*) are: Brahmin (priest), Kshatriya (ruler), Vaishya (tradesmen, artisan, farmer), Shudra (laborer). The Dalit (untouchables) are outside of the caste system, and thus make up a caste class by not being part of a *varna*. The *jati*, then, are thousands of social classifications, which denote the rank by birth.

This means that the caste system has a secular basis but was intertwined with religious conceptions which sealed its existence as a given matter of fact for the Hindu devotee.

The cultural dilemma

But if the caste system is essentially a part of Hinduism as a god-given matter of fact and as such inseparable, then any deconstruction of the castes would lead to Hindu metaphysics falling apart. This presumes that Hinduism gives every human-being a value by birth and this value ranks the person's rights and duties within the society, meaning that no individual efforts and no merits are able to transcend the human being's position within the society as a whole. Any contestation of such a rank would then lead to societal discord, questioning the metaphysical worldview of the Hindu tradition. On the other hand, secular states have questioned the role of religion in a society, and state-church separation in Western societies, although it restricted the secular authority of church dignitaries, did not lead to a dismantling of religion itself. Of course, one might argue that the reason for that is simply that Western society did not reach the stage of Socialism, claiming that the existence of religion is a reactionary symptom of the bourgeois-capitalist society, but religion and religious believers also existed in Socialist states in the Eastern bloc.¹⁴ In other words, the constitutional equality of all members of society, including the equality of men and women, has not led to the collapse of a functioning society.¹⁵ In fact, the acknowledgement of the equality of every individual is also supported by church bodies: progressive religious institutions took up the reforms and backed them based on their respective scripture. For instance, the Fachstelle für Internationale Jugendarbeit in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland writes on Christianity:

Frau und Mann sind nach der Heiligen Schrift gleichberechtigte Geschöpfe Gottes. In der Schöpfungsgeschichte (1. Mose 2,18 ff) ist beschrieben, dass Mann und Frau als Ebenbild Gottes geschaffen wurden. Die Geringerstellung der Frau, die in einigen biblischen Texten zum Ausdruck kommt, gehört zum patriarchalischen Kontext des Altertums. Jesus betont ausdrücklich die Gleichstellung von Mann und Frau (Matthäus 19, 4ff). [...] Die Frauenbewegung des 20. Jahrhunderts hat vor allem die evangelische Kirche und ihre Theologie beeinflusst und dazu geführt, dass sich die Situation der Frau innerhalb der Kirchen langsam verändert hat.¹⁶

As such, the social transformation in Europe in the 20th century and being member of a religion at the same time were both completely compatible. (And being a modern enlightened human being and adhering to a religion is compatible today as well.) In contrast, Marx's religious critique focusses on the practical religious situation in the 19th century, which was very different: "Marx ist in jedem Fall zuzugestehen, dass sein Vorwurf der Verschleierung und Stabilisierung der ungerechten gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse im Hinblick auf das Christentum des 19. Jahrhunderts weitgehend seine Berechtigung hatte. Ein selbstkritisches Christentum ist Marx

¹⁴ For instance, the GDR built a Mormon church for its believers, and the theological seminar for Seventh Day Adventists in Friedensaue continued its service in Germany's East and brought forth priests who were active in communities all over the GDR. For those who are interested in knowing more about Seventh Day Adventism in the GDR, the German-language branch of Hope Media made a documentary series about this topic quite recently, which was aired on Hope TV.

¹⁵ The alleged possibility of a collapse was conjured up by reactionary anti-emancipatory forces in the 1950s and 1960s to avoid a modernization and implementation of equal rights.

¹⁶ English translation: "According to the Holy Scripture, women and men are equal creatures of God. The story of creation (Genesis 2:18 ff.) describes that men and women were created in the image of God. The devaluation of women, which is expressed in some Biblical texts, must be explained in the patriarchal context of antiquity. Jesus, however, emphasizes the equality of men and women (Matthew 19:4 ff.). [...] The women's emancipation movement of the 20th century primarily influenced the Protestant church and its theology and as a result, the situation of women within the churches slowly changed" (translation mine).

insofern auch zum Dank verpflichtet. Wie noch zu zeigen sein wird, stand insbesondere die offizielle evangelische Kirche in Deutschland damals in einem unglücklichen Bündnis von Thron und Altar weitgehend wirklich auf der Seite der Reaktion und Unterdrückung” (Kliemann 1989, 32).¹⁷ Thus, if we want to analyze the Hindu caste society we have two options: “One may consider the ethical issue of the caste structure (*varna, jati*) of Hindu society as a topic of contestation between Anglo-American cultural metaphysics (with its commitment to egalitarianism and contemporary human rights discourse) and that of South Asia (in the case of India, its historically sustained commitment to caste hierarchy)” (Swazo 2022, 21).

Taking the Western angle might lead to the bias that the Indian history can hardly be classified in Western categories, as they have their own historical path and any Eurocentric view might cause the danger of taking a stance of Western superiority. Schluchter attests that this is not the case with Weber’s work, because even though Weber “adhered to a one-sided analysis of the history of religion from a European viewpoint and with European concepts, [he] never claimed that the West was superior to the East...” (cited after Swazo 2022, 24). In contrast to that, if we take the Indian angle, we are able to appreciate Indian society for itself without applying categories foreign to Indian thought to this unique society, but at the same time, it causes the danger that we develop a bias in taking the caste system for granted, even if we contest the basis for the caste system as such, leading to the danger that in the end of the discourse, we would rather defend castes and accept the hierarchization of human beings as a legitimate socio-cultural trait as cultural determinism, without realizing that the metaphysics of Indian religion is still nourishing this socio-cultural phenomenon.¹⁸ Thus, we would become blind to the injustice embedded through castes to explaining castes in a different way: We would argue that taking away the caste system is taking away India’s culture and its proper

¹⁷ English translation: “In any case, we must admit that Marx’s accusation of concealing and stabilizing unjust social conditions with regard to 19th century Christianity was largely justified. In this respect, a self-critical Christianity is also indebted to Marx. As has to be shown, the official Protestant Church in Germany in particular was largely in an unfortunate alliance of throne and altar at that time, on the side of reaction and oppression” (translation mine).

¹⁸ Obviously and for good reason, even after the secularization in Western societies, these societies kept many rules which go back to the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament, since these norms and laws were well established and are necessary for a harmonious society. The danger, however, is that even if India secularized, it would still maintain the caste system in areas in which it has never been questioned, as it is a normative social construct and is even seen by supporters as stabilizing. Nonetheless, I support the idea of a universal ethics through the absorption of universally shared values that connect all world religions, and, thus, it is legitimate, and even necessary, to derive the basic norms from religious laws, since law and guilt are metaphysical concepts. Norman K. Swazo rightfully asked me if this means that we have to adopt a “Eurocentric” position to counter the “Hindu” doctrinal teaching and then continued to argue with A. MacIntyre that we have to ask the salient questions: *Whose justice? Which rationality?* Swazo explains: “Both questions are at the heart of this contention, since we cannot simply abandon our prejudices.” Indeed, I have to agree with Swazo that we do not get rid of our prejudices in so far as any attempt to objectify ethics leads to the problem that we cannot get over our own personal bias. In other words, we remain subjective, so when we search for an objective ethics, which I encourage to do, we do it through our own subjective approach. And this is why I think that pluralism is so important: since everyone has their own subjective view, everyone can abstract different aspects of this universal ethics and is able to contest a norm. Something can only be universally valid if it passes a contestation and turns out to be still upholdable. Concerning the cultural dilemma in my approach in this paper, I have to clearly reply to Swazo that, indeed, with my contestation in this paper I do not solve the cleavage, and, therefore, he is right when he states, “Even if one adopts a Marxist critique of Hindu doctrine and its social manifestations, this still amounts to adopting a ‘Western’ or ‘Eurocentric’ framework of practical rationality so as to evaluate whether justice is being done or not (including here critique of false consciousness and the modes of production and distribution established by the Hindu teachings).” Thus, my approach can hardly be a final answer, but I hope to make a contribution on uncovering norms which seem to be as universally as they are globally acceptable throughout different epochs and societies and which therefore seem to bear deeper truths which only can be found through a process of deliberation (Habermas!).

self-identity as a Hindu nation.¹⁹ A Hindu culture-state without a Hindu religion thus would be as unthinkable as a tree which has a crown but no roots. So the problem is that if we take a Eurocentric view and apply it to India, then there will be the danger that in the end we will not be able to understand India at all, and if we try to place ourselves into an Indian perspective (as far as this is even possible for an outsider), then we will be required to accept the caste system because it is not only regarded to be a stabilizing factor in Indian society in which everyone knows what role one has and which one can fulfill to the best of their knowledge and belief, but because it is an essential part of the construction of society as a whole, a kind of eternal truth which was always valid and which will always be valid, and thus, an unshakable pillar for an everyday orthodox Hindu. Anyways, accepting the caste system is no option, not only because it is psychologically discriminating, but also because we must ensure that physical caste-based violence cannot be justified or even legitimized in any way. There is therefore no way around abolishing the caste system in order to establish a more developed kind of society.

The Maoist resistance as an answer to India's socio-economic problems

In fact, there has been resistance to Hinduism as a dominant factor of the state in the form of Marxist-influenced resistance movements, who are especially active in regions being feared as “Red Corridor” by the Indian state. These insurgency groups, often being called by the term Naxalites, are a heterogenous camp with many different groups, ideas, attitudes toward the use of violence, ethnic backgrounds, and goals. The main theme is a Maoist-inspired Cultural Revolution in which the given is questioned, and a renewal is demanded. Some of these groups also declared war against the state of India. The name “Naxalite” goes back to the village of Naxalbari in West Bengal in which peasants started a revolt in 1967, after basic rights have been declined to them by the state authority.²⁰ I do not want to miss the opportunity to cite voices from India on the issue to go beyond my European view. However, I want to explain straight from the beginning that I am not a supporter of violence in whatever way and that I think that societal changes have to be negotiated through peaceful means in a democratic arena. Thus, I do not agree with those authors who try to legitimize violence. Bhambhri explains the roots of the Naxalites as follows:

An armed guerilla struggle by a section of peasantry against the Indian state was launched from Naxalbari in West Bengal. It was led by Charu Majumdar who

¹⁹ Unlike the term “Christian,” the term “Hindu,” though not being of an ethnic nature, also has an ethno-cultural or more particularly ethno-religious notion, which is why some Hindus deny the possibility to convert into Hinduism and claim that one must be Hindu by birth, giving a possible lack of caste adherence of converts as a reason (cp. Neubert 2010, 57): “As a consequence of the [“non-conversion possible”] paradigm, ‘ethnic Hindus’ are usually considered as the only authentic Hindus. This is also to say that claims to authenticity by converted Hindus are considered as basically unfounded” (Neubert 2010, 58). For fairness’ sake, India is a very diverse country with very different ethnicities and identities. As such, the influences of the caste system today vary from region to region. Withnall (30 September 2020) explains it as following: “The caste system is less obvious today in urban India, where different sections of society live in close proximity and inter-caste marriage is more common. But in rural India [sic], people of the same caste often still live together in clearly defined communities and news stories of neighbourly conflict can often be understood as clashes between members of different castes. [...] And in southern India, it is commonplace to find people identifying themselves by only a single name in a rejection of the caste associations that so often come with surnames.” It seems that in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh, castes are still extremely pervasive (cp. Withnall, 30 September 2020; Drishtias, 28 July 2023), while in Kerala and urban areas such as Mumbai and Delhi, castes only play a reduced role today and a sense of equality is more common. Also note that Northeastern India is the home of tribal communities, where the tribal identity is more important and there is a significant number of Christians and indigenous religions.

²⁰ For a small historical overview of the Naxalites’ beginning, see Kaur (2010) and EFSAS (2019).

broke away from the CPI(M) because he considered that the Communist Party of India (Marxist), formed in 1964, wasn't militant enough and its parliamentary road to establish communist rule could never succeed and the oppressed, laboring classes cannot be, 'liberated from the oppressive rule of semi-feudal, comprador, collaborating capitalist classes' The movement launched by Majumdar which survives in some parts of back-ward tribal areas even till today has declared itself as follower of Marxism, Leninism and Maoism. It has claimed to be the practitioner of the true and 'pure' ideology of communism as opposed to the 'revisionary' and 'reactionary' communist parties of India, including CPI (M). (2015, 15)

Bhambhri claims further that the Indian state authorities have sought to delegitimize the guerrilla groups instead of tackling “the root causes of social discontent in parts of agrarian India and the tribal belt of Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and all the places where the movement has spread its influence especially among the most exploited and oppressed forest dwellers, tribals and Dalits” (2015, 16). He further emphasizes that the “so-called Maoist”²¹ guerrilla warfare against the Indian state is entirely homegrown. It is well-documented that the unfinished agrarian land reforms have excluded lower peasantry, tribals, and Scheduled Castes, leaving them in poverty (Bhambri 2015, 16): “These ‘dispossessed’ strata of underprivileged society who are misguided provide a fertile ground for the State to crush the so-called 'Left Wing extremism' by employing its third largest professional army in the world and highly armed paramilitary organization” (2015, 16). And Dasgupta argues that “The Naxalite movement of the 1970s in West Bengal threatened to overhaul the existing political and ideological framework of Bengali ‘bhadrolok’ society. Front-ranking leaders of the movement such as Charu Mazumdar wrote extensively to exhort the public to participate in a violent rejection of the status quo modelled on the Chinese Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong” (2006, 1920).

Mohanty explained in 2006 that “the Naxalite movement has spread over some 165 districts in 13 states of India and the prime minister has described it as the ‘single biggest internal security challenge’” (2006, 3163). Mohanty explains that he made the following three propositions in 1977: “(i) The Naxalite movement was a pre-organisational movement; (ii) it practised ideological parallelism to a large extent mechanically applying formulations of the Chinese revolution to contemporary India; and (iii) the strategy pursued by the Naxalites was a narrow construction of revolutionary strategy and was not always one of revolutionary violence. At the end of the four decades it seems that there have been significant changes in all

²¹ Bhambri argues that the Naxalites have actually little to do with Maoism as it was understood in China: “It is not only simplistic, even erroneous, to maintain that the Naxal strategy of moving from ‘Liberated Area’ to another struggle for establishing ‘Liberated Area’ has anything to do with Mao’s strategy of Liberation followed during Long March in China” (Bhambri 2015, 16). Furthermore, there is a discussion in academia about how much Maoism itself is an original thought. See, e.g., Wittfogel (1960) and Wu (1975). Wu, for instance, argues that “The inevitable conclusion is that Maoism is a product of a historical situation rather than a product of a school of thought” (1975, 108), which does not mean that Mao’s ideas were weak in nature as “Those who accused him of being incapable of abstract thinking or incapable for philosophy were criticizing him only from a Western viewpoint. How many of his critics have realized that Mao’s way of communication (preferring the concrete and de-emphasizing conceptualization) is an artistic mode and is typically a Chinese preference?” (1975, 110). If we see Maoism not as a philosophy but as a historical situation, we must question whether Maoism can be successful in India at all. And if we agree that Maoism is an actual philosophy (whether original or not), then we still have to ask whether the Chinese mode of reasoning is appealing to the Indian working class at all, since they might have another mode of communication than in China. And if we say that Maoism is not really original, but only an imitation of Marx’s and Lenin’s thoughts then we still appreciate Maoism for converting the Marxist-Leninist ideals in a mode of communication which made it applicable on Chinese soil.

three respects, yet some elements of each dimension persist” (Mohanty 2006, 3163). As we can learn from the three authors, the Naxalites take the revolution in China as a role model. It appeared for the first time in parallel to the Cultural Revolution in China and was differently organized at different times. Though the ideals of the revolution are borrowed from China, the reason for the conflict in India, however, is not imported but home-made, as the land of peasants and tribal communities was dispossessed, making the starting point an agrarian uprising which questioned the legitimation of the ruling elite.²²

Bela Bhatia tried to identify the main roots of the Naxalites in the state of Bihar. I want to take Bhatia’s research as an exemplification of Naxalite activity: “Some broad features of the Naxalite movement are relatively easy to identify. The social base of the movement in central Bihar consists overwhelmingly of the landless, small peasants with marginal landholdings, and to a lesser extent middle peasants. In caste terms, the base of the movement consists of lower and intermediate castes. This applies to the Hindu as well as Muslim communities. The movement, however, also has some supporters among the higher castes and classes” (2005, 1537). This shows that the Naxalites are attractive for anti-bourgeois enlightened people from higher classes on the one hand, and poor peasants from lower castes on the other hand, and the working together of people from different castes shows that these supporters want to overcome the narrowness of caste determinism and other miseries. In Bihar, these include access to education, better access to food, proper wages, dignity for women – in general, basic human rights (cp. Bhatia 2005, 1538). Thus, we might argue that castes are just one out of many issues which Naxalites address. Despite that, due to the heterogeneity of the movement, it is impossible to make a generalization.

What is to be done?

Religion is always subject to change and while in the Middle Ages a secular sphere was practically nonexistent in most parts of Europe, a development to a state-church separation is rather the rule than the exception today. Thus, we can say that there are two possibilities for India, depending on India. The first scenario would be that the caste system is so deeply inherited in Hinduism that the Indian majority does not see a need for reform, and thus overcoming castes, and that those voices which want a secularization might be suppressed. This scenario might even be backed if we assumed that an authentic Hinduism without castes would be impossible, as the *varnas* are an essential part of Vedic Hinduism. The second scenario is that the caste system is dismantled but that Hinduism is not. Nonetheless, such a scenario would no less drive Hinduism into a crisis, because it would shake Hinduism in its core. The only difference with the first scenario is that in this case, this crisis can be overcome.²³ India has many local ethnicities, languages, and a rich and diverse history. As Hinduism is a decentralized religion or an umbrella of religions, the local traditions could transform into locally reformed teachings standing for themselves. To keep up the metaphor of the tree, it would be like the tree producing new seedlings, which then mature into independent, healthy trees. The maxim here is that one has to overcome the old so that the new can grow. For instance, outside of India, there are many Hindu communities which understand themselves as pragmatic and liberal without any devotion to castes, though this is dependent on the place and

²² It should also be mentioned that India does not qualify as a democracy, but despite having elections it is an authoritarian state. It might be called an “electoral autocracy” according to a Swedish institute (cp. The Wire Staff, 11 March 2021).

²³ It can be compared to the Reformation in the Renaissance which questioned the papal authority of Catholicism, and thus something which was an unshakable truth for Christian self-understanding in Western and Central Europe for many centuries. As the caste system in India is even older, the cultural shock would be most likely even deeper and a caesura for the Indian society in general.

community.²⁴ And there are also voices within India, which describe a peaceful Hinduism. For instance, as Tharoor (7 May 2024) argues: “Many Hindus like myself were brought up to venerate the sacred tenets, divinities, and sages of our faith without necessarily endorsing orthodox Hindu social practices like the iniquitous caste system. To discriminate against another, to attack another, to kill another, to destroy another’s place of worship, is not part of the Hindu ‘dharma’-code.” And Tharoor is right when he claims further that India’s Hinduism is quite rich in tradition. This is indeed a chance for reforms, but it must also be politically willed and a religious centralization must be avoided.²⁵ The problem, however, is that the Hindu religion and the state are quite intermingled, and in such a constellation, centralization is always a danger, as usually there is a specific denomination favored over another. One of the main reasons for the Belgian Revolution in 1830/31 was that The Netherlands (even though formally claiming not to prefer one or the other denomination) was understood to prefer the Protestant denomination in the eyes of the Catholics in the southern part of the country. As Desure formulated, “The revolutionary movement was backed by a peculiar coalition between liberal and Catholic forces. Years of parliamentary opposition to the autocratic rule of William I had provided the revolutionaries with a clear political programme, summed up under the slogan ‘liberty in everything and for everyone.’ That is to say: personal liberty, to be obtained via constitutionally guaranteed individual liberties, and political liberty, in the form of a representative system based on popular sovereignty” (2019, 9-10). In the same way, it might be possible that certain Hindu traditions might be favored over others within a Hindu state, whether these traditions are given *de jure* or *de facto* preference, causing a cleavage not only between the different religions in India, such as Sikhism, Islam and Christianity, but also among Hindus themselves. As such, the situation is extremely complex and a change towards liberalism or self-criticism in the next years is rather unlikely in the central government (Union Government). On the level of the Indian states, a positive example for a State, where the role of castes has weakened, is Kerala, which is governed by a Leftist front. The strong presence of Social-democratic, Socialist and Communist ideas in this state and the presence of a single major language, i.e., Malayalam, which ties the inhabitants – independently of caste background – together to a single ethnic identity²⁶ create an atmosphere of cooperation. In the same way, since the traditional occupations vanish in an industrialized environment, especially in urban settlements, there is also a break in the traditional caste understanding. Though we

²⁴ The fact that leaving India does not automatically mean leaving one’s caste is described for instance by Mogul (6 December 2017). She quotes an Indian student studying in London named Saunvedan Aparanti (“One is of the opinion that you leave behind all the trappings of the caste system once you leave India, but perhaps I was naive.”) and writes: “Having moved to Britain for university, Aparanti was surprised to find himself at the receiving end of ‘caste supremacy’ from his new flatmates. The caste system he speaks of – and its trappings – is one that the world has, unfortunately, become familiar with. Stories relating to caste violence frequently emerge from some South Asian countries, particularly India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Headlines featuring the rape and murder of so-called ‘lower caste’ people, or Dalits, are no longer rare.”

²⁵ Actually, this is the crux of the whole issue: Without wholeheartedly-conducted political efforts, there cannot be any change in the long run and such a political will to overcome these structures does not really seem to exist. In a conversation with Norman K. Swazo, he pointed out that he believes that it is a problem of religious teaching first and foremost which is then subsequently sustained by religious and (elite) political authorities and institutions. Hence, he is not so confident that there is “a chance for change” in the social dimension, particularly because of BJP and the Hindutva movement being led by Modi. He underlines this with the fact that Ambedkar understood that the metaphysics expressed in the classical texts undermines any effort to establish a genuine democracy in India, even as he worked to draft a constitution that would put laws and institutions in place contributing to that objective. Thus, Swazo continues to agree with Ambedkar that one is unlikely to eradicate the caste structure of Indian society without removing the doctrinal authority of the classical scriptures that sustain this division of labor.

²⁶ In Kerala, everyone can understand each other, and there is no ethnic group considered to be inferior. Nor are different ethnic groups fighting to dominate the political culture of that state.

often find multiethnic environments here, there is a lack of class awareness. One of the reasons for this lack, I would argue by taking Bhattacharya into account, is “the multiple divisions in the working class and the difficult task of surmounting those divisions” (Gimenez, 4). Thus, overcoming castes alone does not lead to an abolition of oppression²⁷:

Paraphrasing Sparr, if sexism, racism and all forms of oppression and discrimination were eliminated, vast socioeconomic inequality would persist affecting everyone, men and women, white and non-white, citizens and immigrants, able and disabled, etc. The main difference would be that everyone would stand the same chance now of being at the bottom or at the lower layers of the stratification system. That would be desirable – for the burdens of oppression would have been lifted – but unattainable, except in the form of legal changes that outlaw discrimination and oppression while leaving their material conditions unchanged.” (Gimenez, 9)²⁸

Another reason for the lack of class awareness might lie in a certain ignorance of the universal truths of Marxism with regard to its economic critique:

There are the people in India who oppose Marx’s theory (either knowingly or unknowingly or with half-baked knowledge) just like similar people elsewhere in the world. Such Indian opponents express two types of opinions on Marx’s theory - (1) Marx’s theory was relevant to the 19th century Europe but precisely it is not relevant to even those countries. (2) Marx’s theory may be relevant to other countries but it is not at all relevant to India because caste system exists here and this does not fall under the scope of Marx’s theory. These are the two views that are opposed to Marx’s theory. However, both these views are completely wrong. Since Marx’s theory talks about “labour relations,” it applies to *each and every inch* in human society. It applies to every relationship. [...] Marx’s theory applies to all countries, including India, which are based on “exploitation of labour” and class distinctions, since it is the only and correct theory that discovered and explained exploitation of labour. (Ranganayakamma, 2004)

Thus, I personally believe that overcoming castes on a local basis striving towards peace and cooperation can only be applied in Indian States in which Socialists establish themselves as representatives of the people. The big problem, however, will be that the central government and its politics of *Hindutva* will be a major constraint, making it difficult – if not near impossible – to establish a democratic system in India. The orthodox values of Hinduism and the idea of liberal democracy, whether as a bourgeois or Proletarian state, seem to be totally incompatible, in my point of view. Thus, it must also be well-observed how an increase of Hinduism in Indian politics might be a factor in an increase of civic resistance against a dominant Hindu denomination.

²⁷ In fact, the same happened in Europe: after feudalism, the capitalist stage followed. We can observe the same in India. While the caste system is still in the feudal stage, urban areas where castes vanish turn to capitalism if they lack class awareness.

²⁸ Though Gimenez wrote this in the context of the U.S., I would argue that this is also valid for India. Thus, the abolition of castes is not enough to establish a democratic India. Even further, the oligopolization of the means of production which would occur when India reached the state of capitalism would increase poverty, since people who are in a better situation due to their caste status could lose their wealth, while poor people would not automatically have a chance to become richer since they would no longer afford to own the means of production, which would be in the hands of a few then.

Final remarks

Finally, it is noteworthy to emphasize that castes are the expression of an oppressor-oppressed-relationship as the lower castes are deprived of basic rights and have to fulfill duties toward the higher castes. As such, it is not a system of social harmony but a well-integrated social mode of oppression, in which the benefactor always profits on the costs of those who are deprived of their legitimate right to self-expression. The fact that the system has been practiced for so long cannot be seen as a reason for its legitimacy, as people can still fall into a false belief over a long period of time. The caste system as a social institution can be seen as an expression of a pre-modern “traditional” society. As Sherer-Clarke points out: “Hegel sees a progression from traditional to modern to post-modern conceptions of *Geist*. The first, traditional conception ‘understands norms as objective.’ It emphasizes the status-dependence of normative attitudes, treating norms as objective facts which subjects are duty bound to acknowledge and respect through their attitudes. The modern conception of *Geist*, in contrast, treats normative statuses as purely subjective. Emphasising the attitude-dependence of statuses, it fails to recognize any authority of statuses over attitudes, seeing all normative statuses as ‘man-made’ products of our attitudes” (2024, 64).²⁹ It seems to be a consensus in Indian society that norms are an objective fixed set, and therefore, according to that logic, they cannot be changed. As such, the caste system backs the normative system, as the norms which one has to observe vary from caste to caste. At the same time, there is a social struggle in modern India which contests the castes (in the Hegelian sense the antithesis), either in the form of taking part of the government, such as in Kerala, or as an anti-state insurgency, and which seeks reforms within Hinduism which go back to the founding phase of the modern Indian nation-state: “As it comes out, Gandhian approach was basically to undertake some reforms within Hinduism through what is called ‘constructive work’ to secure the support of untouchables behind the *savarna* leadership of Congress in the freedom struggle. Ambedkar, on the other hand, strove for a radical restructuring of Hinduism to do away with caste system itself and to provide a political platform to the rising dalit aspirations. These two contradictory approaches of Gandhi and Ambedkar defined their relationship with each other, with other communities like Muslims and with the British Government” (Mishra 1994). The question of whether an inter-ethnic, all-Indian Hindu class awareness will arise (and as such the formation of a Hindu Socialist theory fit to represent the whole of India or as broader regionalist approaches of the Indian subcontinent³⁰) or whether Hindu and secular forces are going to stand in a fierce opposition in the long run might be one of the major questions in the near future. To reconcile this tense situation, India – as the State of India – is in need of a synthesis.³¹

²⁹ Actually, I believe that objective values do exist, but that they are grasped by human beings in a subjective state, which means that we can never fully grasp the whole since we do not get into a condition of objectivity, as we cannot transcend ourselves but are subjective beings who are subjugated by limitations. This means that each of us has a different interpretation and through the exchange within the society, everyone can present one’s insights, which is why pluralism is essential in a democratic society.

³⁰ This means going beyond parliamentary participation in single states, and choosing an inter-state cooperation and partnership in order to become a strong voice and a powerful opposition against the bourgeois Union Government.

³¹ Already Hegel therefore had a love-hate towards India: “Hegelian philosophy stood both with and against Indian philosophy. On the one hand, the conception of Brahman was very close to the absolute and on the other, was the caste system that Hegel detested as it defied his pivotal motif of *freedom*.” (Kriti 24 October 2022) Hegel stated in the *Philosophy of World History* that he believes that “Orientals have not attained the knowledge that Spirit – Man as *sach* – is free; and because they do not know this, they are not free” (cited after Kriti 24 October 2022).

Caste System among the Yi People

The historical background

The Yi people are one of China's 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities. The Yi are very heterogeneous with many different ethnic sub-groups, and even linguistically, though one can group the Yi language in six dialects, many regional speeches are not yet properly classified (Schmitz 2024b, 12-16) as some of them seemingly go seamlessly into one another as a continuum, and one cannot distinguish them sharply sometimes. The six dialects are Nuosu (Northern Yi), Nasu (Eastern Yi), Nisu (Southern Yi), Sani (Southeastern Yi), Lalo (Western Yi), and Lolo (Central Yi) (Schmitz 2024b, 12-15). Harrell explains that "Yi is a very broad, inclusive category. In this area it includes people whose autonyms are Nuosu, Lipuo, Nasu, Shuitian (or Laluo), Tazhi, Yala, and Bai" (2001, 68) and that "Nuosu are the least problematical: they are uniform in language, self-identification, membership in one of a series of linked clans, and strict ethnic and caste endogamy" (2001, 68). Furthermore, Harrell gives an impressive brief overview of the sub-categories and their relationship to the term "Yi": "Lipuo living in Renhe and in areas of Yunnan immediately to the south also accept their identity as Yi, though they recognize cultural and linguistic differences from Nuosu and do not intermarry with them. Nasu, also called Abu in some of the literature, are descendants of the families of the *tusi* of Puwei and the marriage partners of his clan; some of them accept their identity as Yi and some do not. Tazhi, living in Puwei also, appear to have once been linguistically the same as the Nasu but members of lower-ranking clans who did not intermarry with the elite" (Harrell 2001, 68). In contrast to that, Harrell claims, the Yala and Shuitian do not consider themselves as Yi, the latter one "were eager to distinguish themselves from the Nuosu, whom they considered barbarians" when Harrell visited them in the 1980s; however, in 1994 they did not object to this classification anymore (Harrell 2001, 68). Concerning marriage and relationship, "Nuosu do not marry with other groups (even other groups classified as part of the Yi *minzu*) in the village context; they do not even intermarry among different castes of Nuosu" (Harrell 2001, 75). As such, the Nuosu always stay within their caste and cannot overcome their intra-ethnic division. Hattaway writes that: "Nosu history is of violence and interclan warfare. For centuries the Nosu raided villages and took slaves, forcing them to do manual labor. [...] The Nosu region, in 1956, was the last part of China to come under Communist rule" (Hattaway 2000, 411). Thus, the feudal lords strongly tried to resist the abolishment of feudalism and to block the egalitarian spirit of Communism. Before the PRC was established, Chinese forces already tried to abolish feudalism; as a missionary noted: "In retaliation for the taking of slaves, it was not uncommon in the 1940s to see Chinese soldiers walking through city streets carrying on their back large baskets filled with Nosu heads, still dripping with blood" (cited after Hattaway 2000, 411). The former Bai Yi slaves mock the Nuosu today by calling them princes or princesses to remind them of their lost status (Hattaway 2000, 411).³² So we can say that one ended up in a lower caste either through birth (and thus

³² Hattaway mentions this in the people's profile of the Shengzha-Nuosu. On the Xiaolangshan-Nuosu, he writes: "Prior to 1949 the Xiaolangshan Nosu practiced a system of slavery" (Hattaway 2000, 414). He further explains that in Northwest Yunnan, there were four classes among the Nuosu: Nuo, Tunuo, Gajia and Gaxi (Hattaway 2000, 414). The Nuo were the highest caste and thus the slaveowners, followed by the Tunuo as second highest caste, the latter ruling over the Gajia and Gaxi (Hattaway 2000, 414). The Shuixi-Nuosu were known for owning large estates, with the Black Nuosu being the masters and the White Nuosu being their slaves (Hattaway 2000, 412). The landowner married their children only among other landowners to enlarge their estates (cp. Hattaway 2000, 412). As Harrell clarified, the Nzymo are "the highest stratum of the Nuosu caste system," which traditionally brings forth *tusi* (a kind of leadership) (2001, 335), the Nuoho are the aristocratic caste which are called Black Yi (Hei Yi) in Chinese (2001, 335), while the Quho (White Yi/ Bai Yi) were the

had no chance in life to get a higher status as people in higher castes were strongly prohibited from marrying into lower castes) or by being kidnapped during a village raid by another tribe.

The societal self-understanding of the Nuosu

Schoenhals argues that

There are many fascinating attributes of Nuosu culture. I was intrigued by their caste system, since castes, like race, are usually associated with complex societies. The Nuosu, on the other hand, are subsistence agriculturalists. Related to caste is a Nuosu characteristic especially worthy of understanding for anyone studying mountain dwellers. The Han Chinese, who make up 94% of China's population, view the mountains, and mountain peoples, as a locus of poverty and backwardness – the epitome of the uncivilized peoples so prominent in Chinese ways of thinking about the world – but the Nuosu, themselves, are clearly convinced that they are superior to the Han. In fact the Nuosu believe that they are superior to all other ethnic groups in the world. (2013, 341)

As such, it should not be a surprise that castes were so persistent among the Yi, because they saw their society as being superior to others and therefore their societal order could not be contested easily. Even after the last Yi tribal lands came under Chinese Communist rule, though the caste system became weakened over the decades, it is still present to a certain degree, and I would argue that one reason for this might be found in the Yi's self-understanding as a superior ethnicity in contrast to other ethnicities. But how did the Nuosu justify their caste system? The reason for being master or slave was seen in ancestral relations. As Harrell points out: "In fact, the sense of kinship relations determining ethnic status is so strong that it was the justification for the former practice of slavery and even for the caste system itself. Those of lower status, while still related to their social superiors, are less pure in their ancestry" (2001, 81). For this reason, it was very important to keep one's caste "pure," avoiding any sexual contact with lower castes as this would cause the "noble" blood to become "impure." Thus, the reason behind the continuation of caste for the Yi is not a spiritual codification, a religious duty, but rather regarded to be an ethnic responsibility: it is of a racial rather than a religious nature. As far as I understand the caste system of the Yi, those who are slaves are slaves because their blood is not as noble and pure according to the societal mindset. Practically, however, the Yi castes also have a notion of labor division, since villages were raided to take slaves because workers were needed: the slaves were taken to do manual labor. Therefore, it should not be a surprise that in some cases the "occupational or economic status carries over into the exogamic hierarchy, [which] is a feature that the Liangshan caste system holds in common with the *jati* manifestation of the Indian caste system" (Harrell 2001, 94).

Though castes are distinguished through family relations and marriage, they are not socially confined to their own spheres, but a social interaction among members of different castes takes place: "It is important to point out at the same time, however, that caste

commoner caste, with the Qunuo being the top position within the caste (2001, 336). As Harrell (2001, 96) points out: "As in many societies, someone who could command wealth (in land, livestock, and/or slaves) was automatically prominent, and someone who was wealthy enough could move, for example, from a status of *mgajie* to that of *qunuo*, or the top stratum of the *quho* caste, whereas someone of a *quho* station who was poor could descend into slavery, and even a *nuoho* who was poor was a no-account." Thus one's status could switch within one's caste, so birth did not fully decide the social rank. In this context, it is also noteworthy that, according to Ma Erzi, "in the prerevolutionary society of old Liangshan, with no officially recognized political statuses or offices (except for the occasional *tusi*), people stood out for their accomplishments and abilities in different fields" (Harrell 2001, 96).

stratification in Liangshan has never, as far as I can tell, included notions of pollution or automatic deference, which are so important in the Indian caste system. In areas where there are both *nuoho* and *quho*, they socialize freely with one another, eating at each other's houses and often becoming close friends. None of this, however, breaks down the marriage barrier; only among highly educated urbanites is intermarriage ever considered, and then it is usually decided against; most *nuoho* would rather have their daughters marry a Hxiemga than a *quho*" (Harrell 2001, 94).³³ It is also understood that one does not inquire about caste when meeting someone for the first time, but only the clan affiliation, "and unless it is a clan unrepresented in the local area, or occasionally one with a name similar to that of another clan of a different caste, one knows immediately the caste of the interlocutor" (Harrell 2001, 95). This, I would argue, outlines once again that castes are not primary in social interaction, but only in marital affairs, and Harrell (2001, 95) also points out that the most important factor of class distinguishment is endogamy. Even after the abolition of feudalism, marriage is organized in terms of caste affiliation, something which seems to exist even today in some areas.

Democratic reform and conclusion

Thus, we can say that the caste institution among the Nuosu of the Yi ethnicity represents the pre-modern traditional society, as is the case in India, but the oppressor-oppressed relationship is mostly nonexistent today: members of different castes can even be close friends and caste is limited to marriage today. One reason for this might be that, unlike in India, the Communist Party of China has actively pushed forward reforms in the 1950s to 1970s to abolish the feudalist elements which persisted within the country:

[T]he previously untouched minority areas underwent a process called Democratic Reform (Minzhu Gaige, or Mingai for short). In this process, rather than inducing local peasants to struggle against and overthrow their indigenous leaders, Party nationalities workers made an attempt to co-opt as many local leaders as possible into the new administration (in some areas, many of them had been co-opted already). Those who cooperated with the Communists were made into vice-heads of three of the four arms of the state – the People's Government (Renmin Zhengfu), the People's Congress (Renmin Daibiao Dahui, or Renda for short), or the People's Consultative Conference (Renmin Zhengzhi Xietiao Weiyuanhui, or Zhengxie for short) – except in in most cases the leading arm, the Communist Party. (Harrell 2001, 50)

For the future, we can take three possible views. One is the Eurocentric view in which we regard castes as being intrinsically unjustifiable and demand their deconstruction, based on our Western values. The second perspective is that of the Han-Chinese, in which the caste system of the rural mountain dwellers is a result of backwardness due to a lack of class awareness, which means that more education has to be done to overcome the remnants of class. The third one is the Yi-perspective, in which we take the stance that the castes are the result of a cultural determinism that is naturally present and that should be respected as part of the cultural heritage. Taking the third perspective, like in the case with India, could be seen as an attempt to justify injustice as a legitimate cultural trait, but at the same time it ignores the rich traditions and the self-understanding of the Yi. In fact, I prefer the Han-Chinese view insofar as China is a multiethnic country in which each ethnic minority ought to have its basic rights

³³ Hxiemga means a Han Chinese person. Nonetheless, while among Tibetans intermarriage is quite common today, in the Hindu society endogamy is practiced to keep the wealth in one's caste and the Nuosu also usually rather marry among their caste peers than with other castes, but if they marry outside of their caste, then with someone of another ethnicity, such as Han-Chinese.

to preserve their identity, but on the other hand, it is an undeniable fact that everyone should be equal and treated equal, which is encouraged by the Communist Party.³⁴

Classes in Feudal Tibet

Historical background

Like the Yi, the Tibetans are one of the 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities in China. However, the geographical term Tibet is not easy to define, since Tibetans do not generally refer to their land as Tibet, but use regionally-based autonyms or tribal names. As I have previously written, “The rich ethnic diversity in Tibetan lands was well researched by Hattaway (2000), and Schmitz (2023: 21-30) proposed the following classification built upon Hattaway’s research: Central Tibetans, Kham Tibetans, Amdo Tibetans, West Tibetans, Gansu Tibetans, Golog Tibetans, and South Tibetans. The Kaqê, Pemako Tibetans, Shanyan Tibetans, Xiangcheng, Baima and Walang remain unclassified. The Qiangic-speaking Tibetans, i.e. Qiangic peoples which are classified as Tibetans by the Chinese government are not included in this classification [...]” (2024a, 44) Anyway, when one thinks of Tibet in the West, one often primarily has the Tibet Autonomous Region in China, also known by its Chinese name, Xizang, in mind. Under theocratic rule, Tibet was organized in a feudal class system, though its origins might go back much earlier than the Ganden Phodrang regime. To recall, in 1642, the last secular monarchic dynasty was overthrown with Oirat Mongolian help and the Gelug set up their respective theocratic reign under the protection of the Khoshuts, an Oirat Mongolian tribe (Schmitz 2024a, 15-16, 19-20). The Khoshut Khanate would eventually collapse with the death of Lhobsang Khan after the Dzungars started an attack (Schmitz 2024a, 21-23). Qing China came to help to defeat the Dzungars and Tibet was integrated into China in the aftermath, and since then it has been part of China continuously until today, although the theocrats enjoyed a great autonomy during the republican era in the first half of the 20th century, which is often wrongly interpreted as a phase of independence (Schmitz 2024a, 24-43).³⁵ I will mention that there are also voices which have a different view on that matter. For instance, Tsering Shakya points out that Tibet was de facto independent, and that the Han-Chinese had virtually no rule over Tibet after the fall of the Qing dynasty (1999, 2). Furthermore, some authors (such as Tsering Shakya and Dawa Norbu) have shown very well that the Tibetan population was initially very skeptical of the Chinese communists and that there was also an anti-Chinese image, while the theocrats particularly excelled in cooperating with the Chinese Communists. Shakya (1999, 37) points out: “The Chinese were skilfully exploiting the religious sentiments of the Tibetan people. They used prominent religious figures to communicate with the Tibetan government in Lhasa and selected Geta Rinpoche to proceed to Lhasa to establish contact and explain the party’s nationality policy to the government in Lhasa.

³⁴ Regarding academic publications on China’s commitment to rights, I recommend Wan (2001) to receive a multiperspective view, Zhang (2010) to receive an introduction into the Chinese legal framework and its characteristics, and Liebman (2009) on the rapid development of the Chinese legal system after Mao’s death and an assessment. Concerning public debate in general, I think that many factors are often left aside in the West and I strongly have to agree on Wan, who states, “What has been missing in the public debate in the West is the Chinese voice. Western attention has focused mainly on Beijing’s declared policies and Chinese dissidents’ opinions [...] Decision-makers and observers should know and care about the views of ordinary Chinese since what is being debated in the West is not conventional diplomacy but rather a campaign to pressure the Chinese government according to the Western notion of how a ‘civilized’ member of the international community should behave.” (2001, 15).

³⁵ For differing positions and angles on who ruled the Tibetan territories in between 1912 and 1950 and how to understand their role, see Rubin (1968), Gelek (1982), Wang & Gyaincain (2000), Lin (2006), Tenpa (2012), Lawson (2013), Kobayashi (2014), Jagou (2019).

With the support of the Panchen Lama, Geta Rinpoche and other important religious figures, the Communists achieved a major propaganda victory.”³⁶ And Dawa Norbu states:

My home town, called Sakya, is located in Western Tibet. The news about the Chinese invasion of 1950 reached us sometime in 1952. A soldier whose family lived in a house next to ours brought the astounding news. He announced that the ‘enemies of our faith’ were advancing rapidly from the east and that there would be no peace and happiness in the land of snow. Despite the alarming news, no one in Sakya sharpened his sword or dusted his bow and arrows. [...] The Chinese invasion was not perceived as a threat to the territorial integrity of Tibet – although Tibet had assumed a distinct geographical entity as an independent country in the seventh or eighth century – but more as a threat to our faith. The Chinese ‘liberators’ were called *tendra* – enemies of the faith. [...] The first Chinese – a group of about ten – came to Sakya in about March, 1953. A funny incident took place on their arrival. Some laborers carrying manure to the fields met ten strange-looking khaki-clad horsemen on the way. Now the instinctive reaction of a religious Tibetan to ‘evil forces’ is a ritual called *dogpa*, meaning negation of the evil, which consists of simultaneously clapping hands and cursing. And that is exactly what the laborers did. The Chinese were visibly pleased, joining enthusiastically in the clapping. Later on we would be told that this was a new way of welcoming and congratulating.

I think Norbu’s explanation gives quite an intriguing view. Tibetans feared that a religious persecution could take place, when they heard the news of PLA troops arriving in Tibet, but they did not see the Chinese as “a threat to the territorial integrity.” It is also noteworthy that the *Tibet Mirror*, a newspaper which was published in India from 1925 to 1963, tried to produce the stereotype of a Chinese aggression. Moskaleva (2022, 367) argues in her article that “after the People’s Republic of China (PRC) declared the goal to ‘liberate’ Tibet in 1949, *The Tibet Mirror* started regularly reproducing the pro-nationalist version of Tibetan history and propagating the idea of a unified Tibetan nation. This editorial policy was adopted by Tharchin almost a decade before the flight of the 14th Dalai Lama to exile in India in March 1959 and the subsequent establishment of the so-called Tibetan government-in-exile there. *The Tibet Mirror* shaped a desired image of the Tibetan nation-state that was illegally attacked by the PRC and thus contributed to antagonizing of local population of Tibet and the PRC government officials there.” False historical representations about Tibet were already being spread in India while the Dalai Lama was still in China and China was falsely portrayed as an enemy, even though there were also many Tibetan supporters of a reintegration into China. In the following I would like to shed light on the social order during the theocratic period from 1642 to 1959. As Saklani states: “Tibetan society was organised upon the medieval feudalistic pattern, but the lines were blurred by the intricate interweaving of ecclesiastical and secular society along the hierarchy. The result was a confusing pattern of social hierarchies, which, though well defined and rigid at the same time, did not form any discrete strata. It was something which one existentially felt and lived with; a sense of hierarchy pervaded all aspects of Tibetan life including the ecclesiastical rank, but at the same time it was difficult for an outside observer to comprehend, enveloped as it was by a mystique which often defied analysis” (1978, 27). Saklani explains further that there has been a great puzzlement among scholars on how to interpret the Tibetan society and its social relation properly, as “There are some writers who

³⁶ The Tibetan National Assembly in Lhasa persuaded the Dalai Lama in 1951 to agree to the 17-Point Agreement, which was just signed by negotiators before, and not to repudiate it (see Shakya 1999, 89).

deny the existence of class or caste divisions in Tibetan society, while others highlight the extremely hierarchical ethos of the outer Tibetan social system” (1978, 27). Saklani suggests that “[i]n the Tibetan context, it would be relevant to take ‘property’ as the criterion for evaluating the stratification pattern” (1978, 27). Thus, unlike in Hinduism, where the caste system became a fact by birth through a spiritual codification, the Tibetan class system was primarily not spiritually motivated, but a question of property:

All land was regarded, in the aggregate, as the overlord property, be it the state, the monastery and the nobleman or local prince. The entire land holdings were divided into these three domains, 38% of which, according to Chinese sources, belonged to the state, 37% to the monasteries and the remaining 25% to the aristocracy. It was assigned or lent to a temporary owner in exchange for services (state-labour, etc.). The higher overlord farmed out most of the area to a lesser lord, while keeping a small portion under his direct authority, which in turn was rented out to a member of the tax-payers. [...] For noble families enjoying an estate exempt from taxes, the system compelled them to provide the government with officials and soldiers. The monastic estates also provided the government with officials.” (Saklani 1978, 28)

This is also backed by Li who writes: “Feudal land tenure and serfs were attached to personal occupations of serfowners, which was the ruling foundation of feudal serf system in Tibet. Before the democratic reform in 1959, the three major seigniors in Tibet, namely, feudal officials, lords and temple monks, occupied all Tibetan land, including arable land, pasture, forests, wasteland, mountain ranges, and rivers, etc.” (2009, 46).

Thus, the Marxian observation of labor division is also applicable to the Tibetan class system which is relatively easy to compare with medieval feudalism in Europe, something which Saklani also observes when mentioning the following five keys as being essential to feudalism in regard to Tibet: (1) lord-vassal relationships; (2) political actions based on personal agreements and private political authority, “where political authority was treated as a private possession”; (3) land granted by the lord for services; (4) few distinctions among officers; and (5) a pronounced aristocratic hierarchy (Saklani 1978, 28). Li explains the social relationship as following: “Those feudal seigniors, who accounted for only about 5% of the population, not only possessed all land, but controlled the political power, army and all reigning machines for maintaining their class interests, while those serfs and slaves who accounted for 95% of the population had no land or personal freedom, and were attached to ‘the three major seigniors’” (Li 2009, 46). This means that almost all of the population of Tibet were practically serfs of a very tiny ruling minority. Within serfdom, there were three types of class, known as *khral-pa*, *dui-chun*, and *lang-sein* (Li 2009, 46).³⁷ Around 80% of Tibetans were farmers or herders, and monks and nuns were mainly recruited from these groups, creating strong family connections with the lay population (Schuh 2020, 124-125). Monasteries, as centers of spiritual and scholarly elite, were particularly accessible to farmers. This made monasteries integral to both education and religion in the Tibetan plateau (Schuh 2020, 125). Dieter Schuh explains about the agricultural classes in Tibet:

³⁷ As Dhondup observed: “Traditional Tibetan society used to be class-based society – people were divided mainly into upper class, middle class and lower class. The class system was hierarchical, endogamous, hereditary and exclusionary in nature. On the top was the ruling class (*mnga’ bdag*), followed by peasants and nomads (*mi ser* or serfs), and then the lower class (*rigs dma’ ba*), which included butchers, smiths, undertakers, and so on” (2019, 79).

Grundsätzlich ist hier festzustellen, dass die Klasse der landwirtschaftlich Tätigen im tibetischen Hochland in zwei Gruppen geteilt war. Im Herrschaftsbereich der *dGa'-ldan pho-brang*-Regierung waren dies für die ausserhalb der Viehzucht Tätigen die *Khral-pa* (~ *khral-'dzin*) und die *Dud-chung*. Für die Viehzüchter (*'brog-pa*) finden wir die Unterscheidung von *She-'dzin* bzw. *sBra-dud* einerseits und *Pho-hreng* oder *Mo-hreng* andererseits. In Marpha bestand die Klasse der landwirtschaftlich Tätigen aus *Grong-pa* und *Pho-rang mo-rang*. In Ladakh und Spiti unterscheiden wir *Khang-chen* (in Spiti auch *Grong-chen* genannt) und *Khang-chung* (in Spiti auch *Khang-bu* genannt). (2020, 125)³⁹

Unlike slaves, *khral-pa*, “namely serfs, had some production materials” (Li 2009, 46). *Dui-chun* had no land “and a large majority of them lived their lives as a helper or by selling some handmade articles with an extremely difficult life” (Li 2009, 46). *Lang-sein* were slaves without any capital goods who “worked for serfowners for nothing. They were private property of their owners because they were occupied by them all their life and were dominated by them at will. They might be resold, mortgaged, given as a present, and granted at will. If they fled and were caught, they would be beaten up, and some even were beaten to death. These ‘Lang-seins’ accounted for approximately 5% of Tibetan population, and most of them were passed down from generation to generation” (Li 2009, 46). As these classes were not assigned by birth for once and for all, but attached to property, it must be noted that, unlike in Hinduism, one could change the class: some slaves managed to free themselves into a higher position, while others lost their status and became slaves. What all of these three categories have in common is that they have an overlord. Though castes might be seen as social classes, social classes in return must not by necessity be castes. Castes, as defined by Marx, are hereditary in nature. Indeed, serfdom was also hereditary in Tibet: the children of a slave were also slaves by birth until they managed to buy out themselves. Thus, one might agree that Tibet’s feudalism was renowned for its feudalist social classes, but we cannot talk of castes in a narrow sense, though we might talk of a semi-caste system, since Tibetans practiced a strict class endogamy and ranks were hereditary: “Because of strong class consciousness in Tibet, the Tibetan marriage system is class endogamous. Interclass marriage used to be a taboo, especially between the highest and the lowest class people. Hypergamy and hypogamy, although possible, were very rare” (Dhondup 2019, 79). Furthermore, both the castes in India and the social classes in Tibet served to divide labor and had primarily economical grounds. I would argue that the lack of a spiritual codification is the reason that it was easier to overcome classes in Tibet. Indeed, overlords who are hereditary spiritual figures and who take a rank as living-gods for their whole life are an unshakable element of Tibetan Buddhism which even survived the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” while the serfs were not naturally damned or condemned for life. This restricted the evolution of castes in the actual sense. Anyway, feudalism in Tibet can be compared with medieval feudalism in Europe very well; the only difference is that in Europe, the serfowner himself was not considered holy, but, rather, was given legitimation and thus approval by a religious institution and his office was god-given. Therefore, unlike in Buddhism where a hereditary lama cannot be replaced through a revolution, no matter how unholy he

³⁹ English translation: “Basically, it can be stated here that the class of agricultural workers in the Tibetan plateau was divided into two groups. In the domain of the Ganden Phodrang government, these were the *Khral-pa* (~ *khral-'dzin*) and the *Dud-chung* for those working outside of livestock farming. For the cattle breeders (*'brog-pa*) we find the distinction between the *She-'dzin* or the *sBra-dud* on the one hand and the *Pho-hreng* or *Mo-hreng* on the other. In Marpha, the agricultural class consisted of the *Grong-pa* and the *Pho-rang mo-rang*. In Ladakh and Spiti we are able to differentiate between *Khang-chen* (also called *Grong-chen* in Spiti) and *Khang-chung* (also called *Khang-bu* in Spiti).”

behaves (as could be seen with the 6th Dalai Lama, see Schmitz 2024a, 21-22), the bearer of the office in absolutist Europe could be replaced in a revolution, if he did not fulfill his duties with sanctity. Finally, it is noteworthy that a common area called Tibet did not exist after the fall of the Yarlung dynasty in 842, which means that the areas which are inhabited by Tibetans were politically very diverse. This is important insofar as the class system among the Tibetans was not bound to a spiritual, but socio-political frame. This also means that different political entities in the Tibetan areas had most likely different practical forms of class society. This might also be a reason that so many researchers came to different conclusions on the intensity of class oppression.⁴⁰

The end of feudalism in Tibet and the democratic reform

Feudalism came to an end with the establishment of Maoist-styled democratic reforms in 1959, a situation analogous to that of the Yi people: “In 1959, in compliance with will of all Tibetans, the Chinese government conducted a democratic reform in Tibet, and thoroughly abolished the inhuman feudal serf system which had reigned Tibet for several hundred years” (Li 2009, 45).⁴¹ It is noteworthy, though, that within Tibet anti-feudal enlightenment movements and political interest groups existed already before the establishment of the PRC in the Republican era, including the Tibet Improvement Party and the Tibetan Communist Party. Some Tibetans also joined the Guomindang in order to promote republican values and secularize Tibet. A prominent example for the latter is Kesang Tsering, a Khampa from Batang, Xikang Province (today part of Sichuan) (see Schmitz 2024a, 38).

The impact of the Cultural Revolution

Only seven years later, the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” would follow. As the memory of feudalism was still deep in the people’s mind in Tibet and since feudalism and religion were connected to a certain degree (one has to remember once again that Tibet was a theocracy before), the Cultural Revolution also found a futile ground in the Tibetan areas, and most of the participants of the Cultural Revolution in Tibet were actually ethnic Tibetans (Gao 2008, 24). Nonetheless, the violent attempt to overcome religion did not lead to progress, but instead the opposite was the case: the Cultural Revolution left chaos and destruction (Schmitz 2024a, 54-56). In the aftermath Tibetans tried to distance themselves from the event⁴² and tried to put the blame on the Han, but blaming others is nothing more than historical revisionism: The Cultural Revolution in Tibet was conducted mostly by Tibetans, who even did revolution in the same way as the Han at that time, as Tsering Woesser noted (Gao 2008, 27). “Nonetheless, it cannot be ignored that the Cultural Revolution itself was a violent era which brought much pain: the Red Guards inflicted terror in the whole of China and these ten years which are known in China as ‘Ten Years of Chaos’ today took the life of many innocent people” (Schmitz 2024a,

⁴⁰ Another reason might be the wrong and romanticized image of Tibet in the West as a kind of *shambhala*, a blissful land; thus, the region, a *terra incognita* for many Westerners over the centuries, was mystified.

⁴¹ On the one hand, Li (2009) explains the class system in short very brilliantly and brings in a sound Marxist perspective, but on the other hand, the author is very much based exclusively on the Chinese perspective.

⁴² In fact, with the end of feudalism a social vacuum appeared which could not be filled by the Chinese revolutionaries immediately since many people in rural areas still lacked class consciousness. The majority of Tibetans attempted to fill this vacuum in the Cultural Revolution. However, the Cultural Revolution only led to the very societal discord which we must fear will happen in India, when the old clashes with the new, especially if those who were extremely dissatisfied, such as former serfs in Tibet or their descendants, rebel in a radical way against what they consider to be remnants of feudalism. Only in the aftermath did the participants realize the full impact of their outrage and react with denial and silence about the Cultural Revolution that they once stood for and took part in.

56). Today, most Tibetans are still adhering to Tibetan Buddhism and accept the traditional religious hierarchies and lamas, but there are no more feudal classes, which shows that even in a society in which religious authorities were the lords, it is possible to overcome classes without the need to overcome religion. In fact, I would even go so far to claim that Tibetan Buddhism hardly reformed and that many Tibetans still strongly venerate their lamas and try to act meticulously according to the religious rule in order to accumulate good karma. While all Tibetans are equal today by law, the religious authorities are de facto still seen to be in a higher position by Tibetans, but these religious authorities are no more the overlords and, therefore, one does not have a duty toward them by law but only by belief.

Class System in Korea

Historical background

According to Charles Barone, “Prior to Japanese annexation and occupation in 1905, ‘feudal like’ structures predominated in Korea dating back to 935 A.D. These structures, although similar in some ways to European feudalism, are significantly different when considering superstructural elements. Therefore, forcing Korea into the feudal category is inappropriate.” (1983, 52).⁴³ However, I disagree with Barone’s conclusion that it would be inappropriate to put pre-modern Korea in the feudal category. As Kim showed clearly, feudalism in Korea underwent three phases: “First, the genesis of Korea’s feudalism, which developed from the end of the ninth century to the late fourteenth century. Secondly, the continuum of feudalism in Korea, which the author believes stemmed from power conflicts among the elite and the ensuing decline of the Silla dynasty. It is noted, also, that Korean feudalism has been transformed gradually from a decentralized form to a centralized one. Thirdly, structural distinctions are noted between the above two sub-types of feudalism. The analysis indicates that centralized feudalism has been characterized by absolute monarchism and various social and political systems [...] which were lacking in the decentralized feudalism” (1970, 53). But also Kim acknowledges that there is a major difference between Korean feudalism and European feudalism: “[A]ccording to Marxist usage, feudalism is a social and economic movement characterized by serfdom. In this view, feudalism generally succeeded the economic systems based on slavery and preceded that of capitalism. (Praver and Eisenstadt, 1968: 393-402). It should be noted, however, that in Korea feudalism was not followed directly by modern capitalism as was Western feudalism” (1970, 53). According to Kim (1970, 52), decentralized feudalism could be understood as a social order where landlords and vassals formed bonds through oaths, and not through legal contracts. Lords protected the vassals and granted them fiefs, while vassals provided military and social loyalty in return. After 935, Kim (1970, 54) argues, Koryŏ’s basic social structure was defined by centralized feudalism. This system was based on estate and prebendal systems under a highly centralized monarchy. The centralized authority influenced political, social, economic, religious, and educational reforms (Kim 1970, 54).⁴⁴

The Josŏn dynasty “became in many ways a model Confucian society. Confucian ideas shaped family and society in profound ways” (Seth 2010, 157). Korean Neo-Confucianism “emphasized rank and status; it was important for everyone to know his or her place and role

⁴³ Korea was formally annexed by Japan in 1910; however, the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1905 (known as Ŭlsa Treaty) had already deprived Korea of its diplomatic sovereignty, and the 1907 Japan-Korea Treaty finalized Korea becoming a Japanese protectorate.

⁴⁴ Kim uses Weber’s definition for a prebendal system: “According to Max Weber a prebendal system is a legal institution, pertaining to land tenure, which defines one’s right to use a certain portion of land in return for his public service” (1970, 54).

in society” (Seth 2010, 158). Korean society consisted of three basic classes: the *ryangbang* (upper class), the *jungin* (middle class), and the *sangmin* (lower class, commoners) (Kim, n.d.). We can even talk of a semi-caste system, since it was an endogamical society to protect one’s wealth and, therefore, interclass marriage was a taboo, and the rank or social class was usually defined through birth, i.e. it was hereditary (Kim, n.d.).⁴⁵ The description of Kim (n.d.), however, also makes clear that economic factors played a role in class separation: the lower classes were the forces of production, the higher classes built the aristocracy.

Lee (2012, 181-182) argues that while in the Josŏn dynasty, the monarch was in the highest position and the top authority, which was taken for granted by the Koreans, political authority became more embodied in individual political leaders during the Korean Imperial Period (1897-1910), and the monarchical concept gradually depersonalized. In addition, efforts to strengthen civil rights became even more important at this time (cp. Lee 2012, 182). One has to note that the Korean Empire was proclaimed as a result of breaking away from the dependence of the Qing Dynasty, as Korea was a tributary state to the latter. At the same time, despite the formal upgrade from a kingdom to an empire, Korea was extremely weakened and the Ri family’s power was on the verge of decline. Already in 1894, the quasi-caste system was abolished through the Kabo reforms of King Kojong (Suh 2015). “In case of leading capitalist countries in the west, the movement of nation building was led by bourgeoisie who represented the mode of production in capitalism. In underdeveloped countries, however, the traditional ruling class, which intended to achieve change with improvement, emerged to lead top-down modernization reform, and the Korean model belongs to this category” (Suh 2015, 30). However, I would nonetheless argue that civic movements forced the king to conduct reforms to avoid losing his power, and, as such, when he declared himself Emperor in 1897, the cleavage was already too obvious: a civil society with people’s sovereignty contradicts the mindset of Imperialism. The Confucian-styled Imperialism had the disadvantage that Confucianism intrinsically inherits a teaching on hierarchies. Thus, an equal society premised on hierarchies cannot be equal; it is literally the snake biting itself in its tail (cp. also Lee 2012, 182, who highlights that the strengthening of monarchical power and the expansion of civil

⁴⁵ Kim (n.d.) notes: “우리 나라 전통사회에서 지배계급은 자기신분의 보호를 위한 신분내혼제와 신분세습제를 형성하였으며, 이에 따라 지배계급과 피지배계급의 신분구조가 형성되었다. 이러한 신분구조의 상층은 부족사회에서는 족장제가 전형적인 형태이고, 고대국가 형성기에 처음 등장한 귀족제는 고려 중기까지 지속되었다. 고려 말기에 뚜렷하게 나타난 관료제는 조선 말기까지 강력히 유지되었으며, 동시에 양반사회를 형성하였다. 양반사회 구조의 특징은 관료를 충원하는 양반과 중인, 그리고 생산에 종사하는 양인과 노비로 구성되어 있다는 점이다. 전자가 전통사회의 소수의 지배신분을 형성하였고, 후자는 다수의 피지배신분을 형성하였다. 그러나 조선 후기에 이르러 점차 신분의 역계층화현상이 나타났다. 비록 구조적으로 역계층화현상이 일어나고 신분제도가 없어지지만, 전통적 신분의식은 일제강점기까지 통혼과 행동양식에 강력히 잔존하였다.” [English translation: “In our country’s traditional society, the ruling class established a system of caste endogamy and hereditary caste inheritance to protect its status, and the status structure of the ruling class and the ruled class was formed accordingly. The upper class of this class structure is a typical form of the patriarchal system in tribal society, and the aristocratic system that first appeared during the formation of the ancient state lasted until the mid-Koryŏ period. The bureaucracy which appeared in the late Koryŏ era was strongly maintained until the late Josŏn era, and at the same time formed a noble society. The characteristics of the noble society structure are that of nobles and middle-class recruit officials, and are also composed of laborers and slaves engaged in production. The former comprised the minority ruling class in the traditional society, while the latter formed the majority class, which was ruled. However, in the late Josŏn era, a reverse stratification phenomenon gradually appeared. Although structural reverse stratification occurred and the class system disappeared, traditional class consciousness remained strong in intermarriage and behavioral patterns until the Japanese colonial period.”]

rights is based on contradictory ideologies).⁴⁶ The abolition of the quasi-caste system was even more the result of the Tonghak peasant uprising in 1894: “It was in the Southern provinces of Korea from where the revolts would start and soon spread further to the palaces. Already before the major Tonghak Uprising, Ri Pilje managed a revolt in 1871, mobilizing Tonghak sympathizers. Though we can hardly call Tonghak a Marxist teaching, it led to a class awareness and focusses de facto on a class struggle, which is why the peasantry could be mobilized this easily against the elite, and even further, it later inspired some groups of Korean Communists which were not to [sic] keen on historical materialism, but rather took the class struggle and independence struggle in the foreground” (Schmitz 2020, 232). As such, in the beginning, reforms were mainly designed by Confucian reformers who saw a need for societal changes. Later, Western ideals influenced more and more the reform discourse, and in 1905 the Tonghak teaching formally embraced its Christian elements, calling itself Chondoism. Even further, we can point out clearly that the unrest in Korea was not fueled by secular forces, but spiritual movements, which saw the ruling class as being corrupted. The growing influence of foreign influences, especially from Japan and the West, were therefore seen as spiritual pollution. Thus, on the one hand, the people demanded reforms and civil rights, which can be seen as a resistance against the monarch; on the other hand, the Korean people remained skeptical concerning foreign influences, and opposed modernization in the form of westernization. The internal and external crises must therefore be clearly separated when considering the situation in Korea in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. I think that Lee’s paper (2012) sheds quite an important light on it, focusing on the theory of sovereignty. Lee argues that “Previous studies generally adopted the analytical framework of the western ‘modernity’ model, which overemphasizes the conflicting features between the power of king and that of the people” (2012, 204).

Cultural self-understanding of the Korean nation in the DPRK

Like the Yi, the Koreans always regarded themselves to be superior to other peoples, an attitude that is apparent quite well today in the propaganda of the DPRK, which claims the Taedong River Culture to be one of the earliest civilizations, and which is also defended in DPRK academia:

Our nation is resourceful with a long history and a brilliant culture. Our nation was developed independently from the earliest times with our characteristic language and culture in our country. It is a great pride of our nation that our nation has lived independently with a developed culture from the earliest times. A long history and a brilliant cultural tradition of our nation is based on the Taedong River Culture, one of five civilizations in the world. Five civilizations in the world mean the cultures of five zones in which created by first formation of slave states (ancient state), first class states, after end of the primitive ages in human history in the world. There are the Taedong River Culture in Korea, the Nile River Culture in Egypt, the Two Rivers Culture in Southwest Asia, the Indus River Culture in India and the Huanghei River Culture in China in five

⁴⁶ Suh therefore points out the problem in a brilliant way: “In particular, it is much more difficult to set up standards for the modern state in Korea, where modernization, which meant westernization, was begun by the shock of the encounter with the west, and was in deep conflict with the system of the traditional state. Furthermore, the concept of the modern state in Korea was re-imported from Japan, where it had been translated from the western model of the modern state” (2015, 30-31).

civilizations in the world. The Taedong River Culture is a culture of a first ancient state-Tangun Korea founded in the Taedong River basin around Pyongyang in the Korean Peninsula in the early part of the 30th century B.C. The Taedong River Culture in Korea is one of the world's first ancient advanced civilizations. (Jong & Kang 2016)⁴⁷

Unfortunately, this claim is difficult to prove or refute independently as there is no real research on this outside of the DPRK. Therefore, I can only give my personal assessment on the matter: I think that there never was a Taedong River Culture. Rather, the proclamation of such a culture only serves to demystify and to personalize the mythological emperor Tangun, and at the same time it also grants a special sublimity to one's own nation to suggest above all, of course, an independence (and an absence of interrelation) from other peoples; one does not want to be seen as a subculture or an offshoot of a great power such as China or Japan, but rather as an independent major culture. Thus, this myth rather serves to highlight the Korean distinctiveness and the alleged cultural superiority. As the Korean dynasties were seen to follow in the footsteps of Tangun (though this cult rather seems to have started in the Josŏn dynasty), legitimizing themselves to rule over the Korean people,⁴⁸ it might be no surprise that the DPRK emphasizes Tangun as founder, in terms of self-legitimation, since the DPRK is a neo-feudalist state (on the latter see Schmitz, 2024c). At first glimpse, this might seem paradox, given the fact that the DPRK promotes an "anti-feudal democratic revolution" (cp. Juche Idea Lesson 1), but in fact this is not a contradiction for the DPRK as democracy is not understood in the sense of the modern meaning, but as being governed "independently." For the DPRK, independence means to be free from foreign interference, which recalls a lot of the definition of the "Liberty of the Ancients" as outlined by Constant (1819): For the Ancient Greek people, being independent meant to be a sovereign polity, or in other words: if one was not enslaved or bound on the orders of another nation, then one was free, and thus rights were understood as collective rights, not individual rights:

The [liberty of the ancients] consisted in exercising collectively, but directly, several parts of the complete sovereignty; in deliberating, in the public square, over war and peace; in forming alliances with foreign governments; in voting laws, in pronouncing judgments; in examining the accounts, the acts, the stewardship of the magistrates; in calling them to appear in front of the assembled people, in accusing, condemning or absolving them. But if this was what the ancients called liberty, they admitted as compatible with this collective freedom the complete subjection of the individual to the authority of the

⁴⁷ For another account from the DPRK on Tangun and his alleged historical life, see Kang (1994, 50-58).

⁴⁸ "Tan'gun was the symbol of a community connected by one bloodline perpetuating the image of unity and purity in Korean history. It played a major role in the development and settlement of a homogenous nationalism that claimed Koreans as the descendants of Tan'gun comprised a 'single' ethnic group. [...] Historically, Tan'gun has been highlighted as the basis for national consciousness and national integration in the face of foreign invasions. The *Samguk Yusa* (三國遺事) and *Chewang Un'gi* (帝王韻紀) were written during the Koryŏ Dynasty on the brink of national crisis when the Mongols invaded in the 13th century. Also, since the establishment of the next dynasty, Chosŏn, Tan'gun began to be emphasized, and the leaders of this new dynasty claimed to succeed Kojosŏn by naming the dynasty Chosŏn to inherit its power and establish legitimacy of the new regime" (Kim 2014, 214, 215). Thus, by claiming that Tangun is not just a mythological but historical person, the DPRK can claim to continue the historical path in which the Kims are the succeeding dynasty, while at the same time promoting a new era which is allegedly free from feudalism and denouncing the westernization in certain aspects in the ROK and the model of Western-styled democracy as unKorean, as it does not follow the Tangunist tradition of a god-willed (or better: heavenly-willed) government through the bloodline of a chosen family.

community. You find among them almost none of the enjoyments which we have just seen form part of the liberty of the moderns. All private actions were submitted to a severe surveillance. No importance was given to individual independence, neither in relation to opinions, nor to labor, nor, above all, to religion. The right to choose one's own religious affiliation, a right which we regard as one of the most precious, would have seemed to the ancients a crime and a sacrilege. In the domains which seem to us the most useful, the authority of the social body interposed itself and obstructed the will of individuals. Among the Spartans, Therpandrus could not add a string to his lyre without causing offense to the ephors. In the most domestic of relations the public authority again intervened. The young Lacedaemonian could not visit his new bride freely. In Rome, the censors cast a searching eye over family life. The laws regulated customs, and as customs touch on everything, there was hardly anything that the laws did not regulate. (Constant 1819)

The DPRK still holds to this view on freedom, calling it independence. Now, why is the neo-feudal DPRK calling itself anti-feudal? Since the Ri dynasty Josŏn was a tributary state to the Qing dynasty, the DPRK regards the Korea of the previous time period to be a vassal state and as such as non-independent (Kim 1994, 4, 17, 25). The peasants were exploited by the land-owning aristocracy with the king paying tribute to the Qing. Thus, the higher class was seen to be the longer arm of the foreign power suppressing the common people on the common basis of exploitation of the poorest. In contrast to that, the neo-feudal Kim dynasty calls itself anti-feudal and democratic, because the Kims isolate Korea from foreign influences, and in this way, the citizens can enjoy their "freedom" in the sense of the DPRK definition. And since they live in their own sovereign nation state and (ideally) work for the state, they are not exploited by working for an industrial bourgeois or landowning aristocrat, but for a revolutionary leader who in fact resumes the role of an aristocrat owning the whole state under the pretense of maintaining an anti-Imperialist "people's democracy," which is a weird word given the fact that δῆμος already means "people," and calls the Supreme People's Assembly to ratify his decisions. In exchange he keeps up the national independence and fends off any foreign interference (cp. Kim 1980, 307, 410). With the purge of the Kapsan faction by Kim Il-sung in 1967, the last Marxist influence in the party was eliminated and Kim could establish Juche with his definitions of independence, democracy, feudalism, etc. As such, the DPRK continues "the ancient feudal reign that was interrupted by the Japanese occupation" (Schmitz 2024c, 47) and names its country after the name of the last kingdom, Josŏn, but unlike the Ri dynasty, the ruling dynasty is now the Kim dynasty.

The new caste system of the DPRK

The DPRK installed a new caste system under Kim Il-sung, called Songbun. On the origins of this caste system, Lankov (2011) explains: "In 1957, the authorities launched a large-scale and ambitious investigation of the family backgrounds of virtually all North Korean citizens. As a result of this and subsequent investigations, by the mid-1960s the entire population was divided into a number of hereditary groups, somewhat akin to the estates of medieval Europe." As far as we know, the DPRK caste system has three major castes with plenty of different classes within each of the castes. Collins explains:

The *core (haeksim) class* is assessed by the regime to be loyal to the Kim regime and therefore receives significant privileges in all aspects of life. [...] The *wavering (dongyo) class* is made up of those whose loyalty to the party is

deemed questionable but who can serve the regime well through proper economic and political performance, particularly if they demonstrate loyalty to the party and its leaders. [...] The lowest level, the *hostile (choktae) class*, is prejudged as being disloyal to the socialist revolution, the party, and its leadership. The hostile class is commonly referred to as “impure elements” or “anti-party and anti-revolutionary forces.” (2012, 6, 7)

As such, the classes are structured depending on the assumed loyalty toward the leader. Like in India, occupations or the ancestor’s occupation might play a role within the classification (cp. Collins 2012, 38-42). Lankov argued in the year 2011 that “In a nutshell, the past two decades were the time when the state was steadily retreating from the private life, and also was losing its ability (perhaps also its will) to control the daily activities of its subjects as well as how they made a living. One of many significant changes has been the steady decline in the significance attached to family background (known as *songbun* in North Korean parlance) – once the single most important factor that determined the life of a North Korean.” As such, it seems that the North Korean caste system only plays a minor role today, though its historical role, especially under Kim Il-sung, should not be downplayed. As of 2011, the caste system rather served to determine key positions within the state: “Still, on the very top, *songbun* is important, since the key administrative positions are held by those with good *songbun*, and a mid- or high-level official can make a nice income by milking the private economy. Hence people with good *songbun* still often think about capitalizing on the real or alleged contribution of their ancestors to the establishment of the North Korean regime. However, for a majority the emergence of markets opened a new, faster and more attractive (but also more risky) avenue of social mobility” (Lankov 2011). In the DPRK’s private market, however, it plays no role: “The success in the emerging new economy is usually unrelated to one’s *songbun*” (Lankov 2011).

The remnants of the old society in the ROK in times of their industrialization and bourgeois capitalism

But remnants of the old feudal society also haunts the ROK until today, as we can learn from Kim Kyung-il’s book *Confucius Must Die For The Nation To Live*. As Kim Seong-kon (22 August 2017) commented on Kim Kyung-il’s book: “According to Kim [Kyung-il], both China and Japan abandoned Confucianism a long time ago, but Korea unwisely constructed its society upon Confucian morality, which has since degenerated into hollow formalism and a male-Chauvinist and patriarchal system. Kim wrote that Confucianism was, in fact, adopted to justify the Joseon Kingdom that was founded through a military coup that overthrew the Goryeo Kingdom, the religion of which was Buddhism. After reading the book, I came to realize why every time Korean politicians seize power, they take up the chant of weeding out corruption. Kim argues that such a cyclic repetition is inherent in Confucianism.” Kim Kyung-il argues that Confucianism played a role in the three major 20th-century disasters in Korea. First, the 1910 Japanese annexation was due to incompetent leaders who were ignorant of international politics, which led to the loss of sovereignty (Kim Seong-kon 2017). Second, the Korean War in 1950 highlighted factional hatred and hostility, rooted in Confucianism, as North and South Korea, despite sharing language and culture, were intolerant of each other due to political ideologies and power struggles (Kim 2017). Third, the 1997 financial crisis resulted from national overconfidence, self-deception, and unrealistic ambitions (Kim 2017). As such, South Korean politics still understands itself to be in a special authoritarian position, even if democratically elected, rooted in the Confucian self-understanding of authority and

subjugation.⁴⁹ However, it seems that after 1945, Kim restricts his point of view on the ROK, since the famine in the DPRK, which was definitely also one of the disasters of the 20th century on Korean soil, is not mentioned as such. Furthermore, “[T]he futurologist Herman Kahn first made a direct connection between the traditional values of so-called ‘neo-Confucian’ societies (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) and economic success” (Jochim 1992, 137). However, “[a]s the term ‘Neo-Confucian’ already had a standard use in the history of Chinese thought, the term ‘post-Confucian’ came to be used in connection with the hypothesis that certain Chinese cultural values rooted in the Confucian tradition have a positive effect on economic development in societies where Confucianism no longer exists as a political or religious institution” (1992, 137-138). I strongly agree with this theory: even though these societies do not have a spiritually fixed Confucian order anymore, the remnants of Confucianism have a positive effect on the development of capitalism and the economic growth under the capitalist system there. Of course, along with this, both the positive and negative effects of modern capitalism have also become established in these countries. From a Marxist perspective, industrialization and the formation of exploitative oligopolies among those who own the means of production have been fully established and thus a modern class society with the industrial bourgeois as the oppressor and the worker/employee proletariat as the oppressed. And since David Harvey argues “that capitalism does not solve its contradictions but rather redistributes them across space and time” (Ugalde 2024, 89, see also Ugalde 2024, 86), an industrialized capitalism in a post-Confucian society is still a capitalist class relationship, since the major problem of today’s society is the adoption of the industrial capitalist mode of production.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ I argue that this is one of the main reasons that the ROK is an illiberal democracy today, and why it cannot proceed to become a liberal democratic state.

⁵⁰ Furthermore, one could argue that the ROK and Japan have also become victims of finance capitalism in the sense Collier defined it, as Japan is member of the G7 states and a strong military ally of the U.S., and the ROK was founded under U.S. guidance and is still a strong military ally of the U.S. Thus, neoliberal interests play a huge role in these countries. Note that one of the core themes of neoliberalism is the dominance of economic actors over governmental actors: Neoliberalism emphasizes the importance of free markets, privatization, and deregulation, thus acting in domains where states traditionally claimed a monopoly or at least claimed a dominating sphere of influence, such as the regulation of laws, civic norms and market norms, including the exclusion of critical infrastructure to exposure of the free-market economy and its interests. As the U.S. strongly promoted neoliberalism in the 20th century and Japan and the ROK were (and still are until today) close allies in critical domains, such as military, the enforcement of Cold War era U.S. interests in the region can be hardly overseen and have to be taken into consideration when analyzing the social transformation in the ROK and Japan. Of course, the partnership with the U.S. also brought benefits to Japan and the ROK, such as a security architecture in which Japan and the ROK would be able to defend themselves against their perceived “enemies” and as such security guarantees and defense stability played important roles. A final remark on the term monopoly finance capitalism: By using this term, I expressly do not agree with those who are trumpeting a global financial conspiracy or a New World Order. Rather, my usage and understanding of the term monopoly finance capitalism echoes the fact that capitalism today no longer revolves around the production of goods in the first place, but rather around the shifting of resources and capital in a globalized world. As Collier describes it brilliantly: “Many of the divisions that had, in earlier eras, resulted in company-versus-union confrontations and other sorts of relations now got solved by merely dumping employees and moving production to another country and to a desperate and unorganized workforce” (2022, 3). Large financial institutions in particular are sometimes so important for a country’s economy that they are “too big to fail.” This means, conversely, that the state and thus also the society that the state represents can be blackmailed, and in case of doubt the state is forced to save the institution at all costs, even if this would not be in the interest of the state or the citizens, in order to avert greater damage.

The benefits of Confucianism and conclusion

Thus, in the end, I want to emphasize that even if Confucianism contributed a large part to the fact that feudalism was able to be maintained in Korea for so long, Confucianism should not be demonized per se. Confucianism is a very fascinating religion that aims to create an all-encompassing harmony. (This of course also included social harmony through established relationship structures.) Hou Jiaju “had listed the key features of traditional Chinese culture that encourage economic development, ‘all of which were advocated by Confucianism.’ They are diligence and thrift, tendency to save, respect for work, honesty, and harmony” (Jochim 1992, 141). I would even argue that China, South Korea and Japan are economically so successful in terms of capitalism because of the Confucian attitude towards work and as well as awareness of obligations towards the employer. At the same time, one must be aware that Confucianism and Marxism are clearly mutually exclusive. Confucianism thrives on the assumption that not everyone can be in the same way equal, but rather has their own defined role in life. But that does not mean that one cannot advance within a Confucian society: the civil service examinations in the Chinese dynasties were meritocratic in nature. The fact that hard work and following clear structures lead to recognition and higher status shows that Confucianism presupposes a natural order. In Marxism, on the other hand, inequality is not natural but socially constructed, so that Marxism teaches that this inequality must be overcome because the bourgeois tries to maximize his own profit through exploitation or dispossession, while the proletariat lives in misery. Thus, Confucianism and classical Marxism are two completely contrary paradigms. As such, I want to argue that a society which is exclusively based on Confucian values and its hierarchies or whose values live on as remnants in a Western-styled post-Confucian society might make a large contribution in establishing a neoliberal society, but cannot help us in building up a Socialist society, which is why it should not surprise us that the neo-feudal DPRK is actually capitalist in nature.⁵¹ On the other hand, I also want to argue that Confucianism and the Socialist cause are not contradictory: P. Chao, for instance, argues that “China has always been a class society where the upper classes are conscious of a natural obligation towards their social inferiors, and the inferiors look up to their superiors for exemplary conduct and right action. Thus by imitation and by a societal osmosis the high moral standards of Confucianism were transmitted down to China’s masses. Though China has been a class society socialism abounds in Confucian teachings. Again, though modern socialism originated in Europe, it also germinated in ancient China. We need not take pains in pointing out socialism in the teachings of Confucius and Mencius. These teachings inspired a great number of modern reformers with utopian thought” (1971, 328). And indeed there have been several thinkers who tried to combine Socialism with traditional Chinese thinking or personalities. One contemporary is Leo Koguan who advocates for a revival of Xuanyuanism/Huangdiism (Xuan Yuan Thought) by claiming that the spirit of Xuan Yuan never vanished and could be seen in the ancient writers as well as in Mao Zedong, and as such, Leo claims, the CPC is upholding the Chinese heritage in continuing Xuan Yuan’s ideals (see Leo 2014).⁵² But

⁵¹ I recommend reading Kim (2018), Wev (2020) and Schwekendiek & Xu (2020) for capitalist structures and the role of capitalism in the DPRK. Note that while classical feudalism is not a form of capitalism, neofeudal societies might be able to combine the feudal mode of production with the capitalist one: in the DPRK, this is done through shadowy markets, semi-official trade and parallel existing economies interceding the private and state economy. As such, songbun or rank in general is often a societal (prestige) factor, but not necessarily an economical one. In other words: One might have good prestige (such as soldiers, which are formally favored), but this does not spare one from living in misery (e.g., malnourishment among soldiers is not rare).

⁵² In contrast, Wu (1975) already discussed the question whether it is adequate to see a continuity between Chinese philosophy and Maoism, and denied such a continuity. Instead, Maoism is a continuity of the ideas of Marx and Lenin and thus a transplantation of Marxism-Leninism on Chinese soil (Wu, 1975).

a Socialism with Confucian features, I argue, would not be built on Marxism, then. Instead we could say that Karl Marx and “Socialist” views in Confucianism go back to the same *values*.⁵³

Conclusion

Castes and feudal classes have in common that they evolve out of economic principles, in which labor is divided. Once those who have gained a privileged status try to preserve it, while those who are in need for work to survive, but are unable to buy land, have to rent the land and work for a master or produce handmade goods for a master. Castes established themselves in the very interest of the higher-ranking lords (usually aristocrats or clergy) who want to protect their wealth and continue accumulation. As such, a caste protects the lords from interference by the populace into their state of affairs. In a non-caste feudal society, the feudal lords are masters by birth, but their societal status is not protected or codified in general and, therefore, their position can be subject to change. In contrast to that, castes are very pervasive, even if they are formally abolished, because the aristocratic castes regard themselves to be aristocratic by nature: they do not regard themselves as possessing a rank through a cultural appropriation, but they regard their rank to be a naturally given fact. This makes it difficult to contest castes and to break up their exclusive nature. Thus, castes are immune to revolutions and a socio-political change is very difficult to be adopted in practice, even if the castes are no longer inclusive in themselves, which means that befriending people from different castes becomes normal. Thus, the caste is a “mark” for life, in contrast to a feudal class society which can be subject to reforms. (Even if such reforms do not abolish classes but only bring forth another form of class society, such as the industrial revolution in which the bourgeoisie took over through owning the means of production, resulting in a distinction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the modern sense.)

What is noteworthy is the fact that it is often not easy to differentiate sharply between a caste and a feudal class, because every society is different and therefore more or less drawn toward the prototype of a caste. As such, the feudal Tibetan and pre-modern Korean societies can be grouped as semi-caste societies, because the socio-cultural framework made it difficult to shift one’s rank, though it was not impossible. The fact that the class was not an unchangeable lifelong brand makes it difficult to speak of a caste, but at the same time there were many social mechanisms and taboos that prevented one from changing one’s class easily, so that class membership was maintained through marriage and passed on to the next generation. Finally, while in a class society grievances can be overcome because one can draw attention to them and work to overcome them (i.e., through a peaceful class struggle), this is not possible in a caste society because the castes already limit what one can claim legitimately in a society (meaning that one’s rank is a limitation without a chance to go beyond this boundary). Consequently, a true social consensus can never really be achieved in a caste society because one cannot easily raise one’s voice if one is not in the position to do so due to the caste’s societal status.

⁵³ Though we could argue with Wu (1975) that these are only formal similarities, which are a result of abstraction or conceptual elaboration, but this does not mean that one has to do anything with the other, and thus, if we argued in this way, it would be anachronistic to call Confucian welfare ideals to be Socialist. On the other hand, two thinkers are able to have similar ideas independently of each other in two different places on the globe, which means that both abstracted the same particular value, even if both stand in different schools of thought. Thus, certain ideas of both schools, Marxism and Confucianism, might theoretically draw to the same values, even though there is no historical continuity or interception among them.

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Author

Timo Schmitz received an MA in philosophy and political science from the University of Trier, where he is currently a PhD student in philosophy. Schmitz has two favorite interests that could not be more different: (1) philosophy of antiquity, especially ancient Greece, with a focus on Platonism, and (2) Juche ideology, the state doctrine of the DPRK, its principles and theoretical components as well as its practical outcome. Additionally, he has a great interest in China and its ethnic diversity.



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