Summary

In the late 19th Century, the great German scholar Max Weber (1864-1920) underwent one of the first systematic studies on ancient Chinese culture from the Western world. In his book, “The Religion of China, Confucianism and Taoism”, he argued that modern bourgeois capitalism evolved in Western Europe, but not in China, was owing mainly to the absence of a particular kind of religious ethic as a motivating force, which is demonstrated by the rationalisation of religious ideas.

The intention of this master thesis is not to re-examine the development of capitalism in China, but to show that ideological rationalization did happen in ancient China, though not exactly identical to that in the West.

Max Weber’s concept of rationality is used as the criterion to determine the level of rationalization in China. One important element about rationalization is that it is not something related to rational action, but rather a process of systematization. Therefore this thesis is a diachronal study of ideological development covers from the periods of Shang to Han.

This study concludes that ideological rationalization in ancient China, culminated during the Western Han era (206 B.C. - A.D. 24). However, the quality of ideological rationalization in the Western Han era is not as high as those in the Confucian and Mohist schools of thought during the Spring and Autumn period (770 - 476 B.C.), when certain aspects of rationalization, including the belief of an omnipotent God and the abandonment of magic and witch-craft are taken into consideration.

The findings of the study might be useful for further research in the area of ideological development in ancient China, especially in the field of religious thinking.