

The evolution of Confucian thought in American literature

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Abstract: Confucian thought has shaped the history and culture of China, being the most important ideological system in the historical process of China, and has also influenced the literature and social development of the United States. Through the acceptance and development of Confucian thought by American literary figures such as Franklin, Emerson, and Pound, American literature has gradually integrated with Confucian thought, laying an important ideological foundation for the culture, morality, and philosophy of modern American society.

Keywords: American Literature, Confucian Thought, Literary Figures, Integration

1. Introduction

Confucianism has inscribed the long scroll of Chinese historical culture for thousands of years, not only shaping the cultural characteristics and national personality of our country but also permeating into American literature across the ocean. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Catholic missionaries spread Confucian cultural ideas to the West. Especially in the mid-to-late 16th century, the Western missionary Matteo Ricci, who had lived in China for many years, translated Confucian classics such as the "Analects" into Latin. Subsequently, Confucian thought spread widely in the Western world in various languages. By the 18th century, Confucian thought began to enter American society. Since then, Confucian culture has gone through various periods in the American literary world, gradually occupying a place in the collision with American culture, making a unique contribution to the development of American literature and culture.

2. The period of introduction of Confucian thought: The 18th Century

In the 18th century, as an emerging nation, the United States faced an extremely severe and prominent issue: how to break free from the shackles of colonial culture from the former mother country and construct a literary identity that belonged to the American soil. American literary figures, based on the foundation of North American Indian culture, absorbed a great deal of literary nourishment; at the same time, they also cast their gaze on the distant and ancient Eastern culture, discovering and drawing cultural elements from Confucian thought.

As one of the representative figures in the germination stage of American literature, Benjamin Franklin had a comprehensive exploration of Eastern culture, especially showing a strong preference for Confucius's teachings within Confucian thought, often praising them with high praise, such as referring to Confucian philosophy as "great wisdom" [1]. Franklin not only attached great importance to Confucian philosophical thought, but he also practiced Confucian thought to purify and instruct the American people who had not yet recovered from the war at that time. Franklin believed that Confucian thought had important enlightenment for American culture and society in three aspects: First, the public must regulate their own behavior and improve their cultivation. Second, literary figures and thinkers should guide and educate the general public. Finally, ordinary individuals should follow the good as the stream flows. In addition, Franklin creatively summarized the Confucian ethical and moral thoughts into the moral qualities needed by American society, that is, temperament, prudence in speech, determination, order, diligence, sincerity, thrift, justice, tranquility, simplicity, modesty, cleanliness, and self-restraint. Confucian thought, under Franklin's practice and refinement, entered American social life in the form of literature, playing an important enlightening role in

the literature and social development of later generations. It can be said that Franklin was a pioneer in introducing Confucian thought into the American literary world.

3. The flourishing period of Confucian thought: The 19th Century

Following Franklin's introduction and integration of Confucian culture, by the mid-19th century, American literature gradually became harmoniously aligned with Confucian thought. The representative figures of this period were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, both of whom actively absorbed and integrated Confucian thought, fostering the development of American literature and the construction of a national identity.

3.1. Emerson Marks American culture with Confucian thought

In 1837, Emerson's "The American Scholar" declared that American literature had become independent from British literature, and he called for "transcending one's customs and environment... citing Confucius..." [2], which marked the beginning of the true integration of Confucian thought with American literature.

In the mid-19th century, New England culture in the United States was in a period of gradual revival, in urgent need of cultural elements from different countries or fields to strengthen this "spark of culture." Thus, the exploration of the distant Eastern religion and philosophy emerged in the New England region. Emerson, a leader of the avant-garde of American culture, established the "Transcendental Club" in this cultural revival, aiming to express his strong desire for social progress and ideological liberation, which also made him the first person to promote Eastern philosophical thoughts and was later called the "Confucius" in the history of American culture.

Emerson's veins ran with the blood of the New England religious spirit, but his educational experience and the academic atmosphere at Harvard led him to question and ponder the doctrines of Calvinism. He then discarded the pessimistic religious ideas such as "human beings cannot save themselves," and began to accept the new, more positive doctrines of Unitarianism within Christianity, which contained logic and philosophy, such as "human self-redemption" and "human capacity for self-improvement." This was a significant advancement in Emerson's thinking; he started to view the previously fatalistic doctrines through the lens of human subjective initiative. However, the overly rational and logical nature of Unitarianism greatly constrained Emerson's romantic spirit. Therefore, under the influence of ancient Chinese Confucian philosophical thought and European culture, he established the "Transcendental Club," which was more characteristic of romanticism, and proclaimed that "one can intuitively recognize the truth... one is God." This seemingly heretical idea broke the shackles of theological and religious doctrines, infusing the United States with a new national culture and providing an ideological foundation for America's capitalist politics and economy.

Emerson actively drew nourishment from Confucian culture, advocating the concept of "Transcendentalism" to demonstrate the importance of Confucian thought. According to statistical data, since 1836, Emerson has cited and excerpted Confucian teachings of Confucius, Mencius, and others hundreds of times. He once described his admiration for Confucian thought in the style of prose poetry: "It contains the religious sentiment of a poetic and noble soul... great ethics, eternal needs." Therefore, it is no surprise that Emerson revered Confucius as the "Sage of the East." The integration of Confucian thought with Emerson's literary works is mainly reflected in the following three aspects:

Firstly, Emerson embraced and accepted the Confucian concept of "unity of heaven and man." Confucianism posits that the "unity of heaven and man" represents the principles governing all things in the universe. How to achieve this unity is addressed in the "Analects." Confucius did not believe that knowledge is the foundation of "unity of heaven and man." Instead, he advocated that knowledge should be integrated into natural activities, which is the most crucial method to achieve unity. Emerson greatly agreed with this in his seminal work, "The Laws of Mind," stating: "One who is well-versed in morality, knowledge, and character is merely a scholar, while nature and simplicity lie in their endless depth." [3] Emerson also proposed the idea of "learning from heaven and earth" based on the Confucian concept of "unity of heaven and man," asserting that individuals can benefit from the natural world and that if the consistency between humans and nature is ignored, then science lacks humanity. However, due to the distinct influences of history, culture, and society, Emerson transformed the Confucian concept of "heaven" into "God" and

diverged from the Confucian view that "unity of heaven and man" is about harmonious coexistence with nature, neglecting the subject's initiative. Emerson inherited the Western cultural notion of individualism, emphasizing the self-worth and infinite potential for development of individuals, which differs from Eastern culture. Nevertheless, overall, his thought is deeply influenced by the Confucian and Daoist ideas of "unity of heaven and man."

Secondly, Emerson emphasized the moral principles of Confucian thought. He regarded these principles as intellectual material for literary creation, interpreting the Confucian ideals of "winning people over with virtue" and "great virtue carries all things" as "morality governs the world" and "the inspirational role of moral cultivation." As is well known, "benevolence" (ren), as the core of Confucian morality, holds an important position in Confucian thought. For instance, Confucius once said in the "Analects, Yan Yuan" that "all under heaven returns to benevolence." Another representative figure of Confucianism, Mencius, also defined "benevolence" as human nature in "Jin Xin Xia": "Benevolence is man himself." Emerson placed great importance on the "benevolence" of human nature, frequently citing the teachings of Confucius and Mencius in his works. For example, in his essay "Character," Emerson fully elaborated on Mencius's concept of "benevolent goodness," interpreting it as "a pure will like water... irresistible."

At the same time, Emerson also valued another moral idea and ethical norm of Confucianism, "propriety" (li). Confucius once discussed "propriety" in the "Analects," saying, "Respect without propriety becomes laborious... straightforwardness without propriety becomes harsh." Emerson provided a more vivid explanation: "Elegant appearance is better than beautiful looks, and proper behavior is better than elegant appearance... Etiquette is the art among arts." He believed that etiquette is the most important social norm for people's behavior, considering that "a lady is tranquil, a gentleman speaks little," which echoes Confucius's Confucian advocacy of "being cautious in action and speech."

Finally, Emerson embraced the Confucian concept of the Doctrine of the Mean. As an important methodology in Confucian thought, the Doctrine of the Mean is a crucial means to realize the ideas of "benevolence" (ren) and "propriety" (li). In the "Analects," Confucius used the phrase "too much is as bad as too little" to illustrate the importance of the Doctrine of the Mean. Emerson similarly regarded the Doctrine of the Mean as comparable to the "golden rule" of Jesus in the Bible, believing that "Confucius had discussed what Jesus called the golden rule 500 years before, demonstrating Confucius's unique insights and precise discernment in the Doctrine of the Mean."

It can be said that many of Emerson's literary works and his creative process have drawn key cultural and ideological material from Confucian thought, presenting the thinking and language of modern people to posterity. Silently and subtly, it has forged the unique characteristics of the American people, with Confucian thought influencing the development of American society like "moistening things silently."

3.2. Thoreau's Confucian influence on American lifestyle

Following Emerson, the literary figure who had a profound impact on the American literary scene was Thoreau, whose representative work, "Walden; or, Life in the Woods," tops the list of "The Ten Books That Shaped the American Character." Influenced by Emerson, Thoreau gradually embraced the philosophy of Confucianism. In the 1830s, as Emerson's capable assistant, Thoreau began to engage with ancient Chinese philosophical texts. In the 1840s, Thoreau started to introduce Confucius and his works in "The Dial," a magazine edited by Emerson. These experiences provided an important ideological foundation for the success of Thoreau's representative work, "Walden." In the book, he seamlessly integrated American literature with Confucian culture, frequently citing relevant aphorisms from Confucian classics such as "The Great Learning" and "The Analects." He fully absorbed the essence of Chinese Confucian philosophy and constructed the American lifestyle through the approach of "knowledge" and "action."

Firstly, Thoreau advocates the moral spirit of Confucianism. Throughout his literary works, Thoreau consistently maintained that the cultivation of moral spirit is the foundation of life, not material possessions. For instance, in "The Beanfield," Thoreau believed: "I want to allocate my energy to sow... sincerity, simplicity, innocence, faith, and so on." [5] Thoreau considered moral character to be far more noble than material things, and he even cited the Confucian classic "The Analects," which says, "Virtue is not solitary; it will have neighbors," illustrating that those with virtue are never alone. At the same time, Thoreau recognized the inspirational power of virtue, citing in Chapter 9 of "The Beanfield" the words from "The

Analects," "When the ruler is benevolent, the people will be benevolent," to demonstrate the social exemplary power of morality. Thoreau also regarded "promoting good" as the essence of moral behavior, believing that "goodness is a victor who never fails and is always praised." He also cited Mencius's view that "The difference between man and beasts is slight; ordinary people discard it, while gentlemen preserve it," arguing that once a person loses their good moral character, there is no difference between them and beasts. Furthermore, he cited "Gao zi I" to explain that a person's good moral conduct needs to be cultivated, just as trees need watering. Thoreau's understanding of Confucian moral philosophy, to some extent, transcended Emerson. He not only established the normative role of Confucian morality but also proposed specific practical methods for "promoting good," which had a more profound impact.

Secondly, Thoreau admired the Confucian idea of self-cultivation. In his book "Walden," Thoreau repeatedly emphasized that the spiritual distress of Americans mostly stems from worldly materialism, which prevents people from appreciating the true essence of life. However, the public often fails to grasp this, and can only lament: "This is just the way life is." With an awakened perspective, Thoreau recognized the "ignorance" of Americans towards life. Thus, in the opening of "Walden," he cited Confucius's view from "The Analects," "To know what you know and what you do not know, that is true knowledge," to tell the world what "knowledge" is and how to understand oneself and life. Thoreau emphasized in the book that life is a long and arduous process of exploration that requires tempering to forge a new self. Therefore, in the chapter "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," he quoted from the Confucian classic "The Great Learning," "If it can be renewed daily, it can be renewed day by day, and perpetually renewed." Thoreau firmly believed that "everyone has the ability to consciously improve their own life," which is also the reason why Thoreau chose to live in solitude. Thoreau used this to tell the world to "face life... to test whether one can learn to live... to avoid living in vain" [6], which is very similar to the Confucian advocacy of "learn and practice constantly" and "self-examination three times a day." In the final chapter of "Walden," Thoreau even cited the Confucian thought of "A man of integrity cannot be deprived of his will," showing an unusually firm display of his desire and confidence to maintain his mind in the muddy world of affairs.

Thoreau, with his unique influence through personal practice, provided a lifestyle for American society at the time that could serve as a reference. To a certain extent, Thoreau's approach was very similar to the Confucian principle of "the unity of knowledge and action," so much so that Chinese literary figures and thinkers, including Lin Yutang, considered Thoreau to be a paragon in the American literary world for understanding the Chinese perspective on life and the aesthetic of living.

4. The mature period of Confucian thought: The 20th Century

As the 20th century progressed, the integration of American literature with Confucian thought became even more intimate. Among the many literary figures, Ezra Pound was the writer most significantly and noticeably influenced by Confucian thought. Unlike Emerson and Thoreau, Pound's acceptance of Confucianism stemmed more from his love for Chinese script and classical literature, which he developed into an appreciation and imitation of Chinese thought and history.

At the beginning of the 20th century, influenced by Fenollosa's manuscripts related to Chinese culture, Pound embarked on a journey to explore the traditional Chinese poetry culture, translating and imitating the creation of many works with Chinese cultural themes. In 1915, Pound's "Cathay" garnered attention from the American literary community, in which he compiled and included 19 pieces of ancient Chinese poetry. Subsequently, Pound also translated Confucian classics, such as "The Great Learning," "The Doctrine of the Mean," and "The Analects," and even translated the "Book of Songs" in 1954.

In the process of translating and studying Chinese poetry and philosophy, Pound was attracted by the essence of traditional Chinese culture and gradually gained insight, especially benefiting from the concise style and profound ideological content of ancient Chinese classics. Based on his research, Pound creatively proposed the literary principles of Imagism, pioneering his own style of Imagist poetry, which was admired and imitated by subsequent American poets. In addition to imitating the literary form of classical Chinese poetry, Pound's works also integrated the long-standing historical culture and philosophical traditional thoughts of China. He believed that Confucian thought is a rational way of thinking, capable of seeking the essence of things through the philosophical method of "ge wu" (investigating things). The so-called "ge wu" is the foundation of all achievements, which is to understand things in a scientific and objective way. In the

Confucian "Book of Rites · The Great Learning," it is stated: "In ancient times, those who wished to make their bright virtue known... sought knowledge through investigating things." Pound strongly agreed with the cognitive attitude of "ge wu" in classical Chinese poetry in his works, believing that "Chinese poetry deals with things... abstract concepts" [7]. In "ABC of Reading," Pound considered the Confucian method of "ge wu" to be the correct and scientific way of cognition.

In Pound's view, poets should, like scientists, use all things to explore nature and obtain the "eternal way" of humanity through historical culture. With a great sense of historical responsibility as a poet, Pound interpreted Chinese culture as a cultural epic for all of humanity in his cultural classic, "The Cantos." He detailed the rise and fall of Chinese historical progress and regarded Confucian thought as the primary reason for the development of Chinese history. In "The Cantos," Pound listed the succession of several dynasties in China, from the times of Yao and Shun to the Qing Dynasty, and emphasized the importance of the Confucian idea of "teaching the people to be good." Confucian doctrine believes that the key to "teaching the people to be good" lies in the emperor's self-restraint. Confucius once said, "The government is to be upright..." [8], and then he emphasized the virtue of benevolence, not to be implemented by tyranny, "If the ruler is good, the people will be good." "The Cantos" objectively and directly quotes this ethical thought of Confucius, believing that "rulers should act with the virtue of benevolence" [9]. "Benevolence" for Pound is not only the experience of Chinese culture and history but also should be a remedy for Western culture and a source of strength for the development of the United States. Therefore, at the end of "The Cantos," Pound calls out, "Let our monarch also cry out for mercy and justice" [10].

American literature, much like American society, has from its inception to its maturity and flourishing, reflected a developmental characteristic of inclusiveness. Among the many cultural elements, traditional Chinese culture, represented by Confucian thought, is one of the sources that American literature is most eager to draw upon and learn from. To a certain extent, Confucian thought is the spiritual aspiration and source of innovation for American literature. Today, in the new century, the fields of Chinese literature and culture should reflect on how Eastern and Western cultures can better integrate within the realms of literature and culture to achieve the internationalization and globalization of Chinese culture. This goal remains a significant and long-term task.

5. Conclusion

Confucian thought, as an integral part of traditional Chinese culture, has not only profoundly influenced Chinese society but also crossed the oceans, leaving a deep mark in American literature and culture. From Franklin in the 18th century to Emerson and Thoreau in the 19th century, and then to Pound in the 20th century, the essence of Confucian thought has been reflected in various developmental stages of American literature. These ideas have not only enriched the connotation of American literature but also provided new perspectives on the moral concepts and lifestyle of American society. The dissemination and acceptance of Confucian thought demonstrate the power of cultural exchange and the possibility of mutual learning and integration between different cultures. In today's globalized world, the internationalization and globalization of Confucian thought still have significant practical significance and are worthy of our deep reflection and exploration.

6. References

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