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Paul Wellen

Beijing Language Institute

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Pound and China: Ezra Pound's Preference for Chinese over Western Philosophy and his Misuse of Confucius

PAUL WELLEN

Ezra Pound is looked upon by some critics in both East and West as a poet who successfully bridged the gap and brought two widely divergent cultures closer together. In his opus magnum, the Cantos, he weaves into one fabric quotations from Western historical chronicles and from comparable texts in the Chinese tradition, such as the Shu Ching. While much of this work is commendable from the standpoint of cross-cultural exchange, an unfortunate and less than praiseworthy aspect of it must be faced.

As is well known, Pound spent much of his active life in Italy working to further the cause of fascism. His support for Mussolini and Hitler is notorious. What is less well known, and often ignored, is the fact that Pound used Confucian philosophy to justify the policies of both fascist Italy and Nazi Germany throughout the 1930’s and 40’s. One might cite here, as a single example among many, Pound’s comparison between a statement made by Hitler and a specific passage in a Confucian text.

The position of a country abroad depends exclusively on its organization and INTERNAL coherence. Der Fuhrer, 1939.

(which is also Confucius’ 5th paragraph of the Great Learning preceding the chapters by T’seng T’seu Ta Hio)

(Communications)

In the cited “5th paragraph,” Confucius calls for well-ordered familial relations as a prerequisite for a well-ordered state. Pound often used Confucian thought to justify all sorts of atrocious political doctrines. In the interests of dispelling several misconceptions about Pound’s interest in China, I propose to explain why the poet chose Confucianism rather than a Western philosophy to provide a basis for his fascist vision of society.
The reader may first desire a brief overview of Confucius' philosophy. Confucius lived in the troubled “Spring and Autumn” period, when many competing states were at war and internal rebellion within these states was rife. There was no fixed philosophy to which the rulers could appeal; instead “a hundred schools” contended. Confucius sought out the oldest philosophical sources of his day in an attempt to revive the thought of the previous dynasties which were not so plagued by conflict. He imagined the bygone era to be a golden age in which virtue prevailed, and he made numerous references to the exemplary monarchs of that time, such as “Sublime were Shun and Yü! All that was under heaven was theirs, yet they remained aloof from it” (Analects, VIII, 18).

For the sake of convenience, we will separate Confucius’ philosophy into two strands: one which may attract the contemporary reader, and another which he might find extremely objectionable. The first strand is the love of virtue, exemplified in the exhortation:

The true knight of the Way must perforce be both broad-shouldered and stout of heart; his burden is heavy and he has far to go. For goodness is the burden he has taken upon himself; and must we not grant that it is a heavy one to bear? (Analects, VIII, 7)

Confucius called the highest virtue ren, which can be roughly translated as “humanity.” Ren can also be defined as “benevolence,” “freedom from selfishness,” or “the inner love for man which prompts just deeds.” (Mathews, 3099). Another essential virtue which Confucius taught was yi or “right conduct.” This term has variously been translated as “righteousness,” “duty to one’s neighbor,” and “patriotism” (Mathews, 3002).

Pound was especially interested in three other Confucian philosophical terms. These were Hsin (Sincerity), Te (Virtue), and Hsiao (Filial Piety). He was attracted to the Chinese ideographic manner of representing such moral qualities because the metaphoric properties of the characters divested them of their abstractness. Sincerity, for example, is composed of two components meaning man and words.” Pound explained the derivation in this way: “Man and word; man standing by his word, man of his word, truth, sincere, unwavering” (Con., 91). Such notions constitute the positive, or ethical strand of Confucius' thought, though as we will later see, the ideograms do not always have such positive ethical content.

The second, or objectionable strand of Confucius’ outlook places an extraordinary emphasis on order and ritual. Most modern readers will find this strand unattractive because it entails dictatorial politics and a feudal (or even pre-feudal) view of human social relations. The Analects contains countless statements which are unacceptable to today’s reader. The modern democrat would not countenance, for example, Confucius’ insistence that “he who holds no rank in the state does not discus its politics.” (Analects, VIII, 14). Nor would the advocate of
sexual equality have any sympathy with Confucius’ view on women. According to
tradition, when King Wu said “I have ten ministers,” Confucius remarked, “there
was a woman among his ten, so in reality there were only nine men.” (Analects. VIII.
20). Such elitist comments are commonplace in the Confucian canon, and are
reinforced by certain ideographic metaphors. For example, the character for minister,
or government official, is a picture of a man kowtowing before the Emperor, as
seen from overhead.

While it would be admittedly unfair to criticize Confucius on the grounds that
he was not a democrat or a believer in sexual equality, defense of him on the grounds
that he was a product of his times is difficult. Numerous historians have analyzed
Confucius’ conservative stance, pointing out that even in his day he was considered
a reactionary. Wu Tien-wei argues that Confucius opposed the more advanced
Legalist philosophers of his era, because he believed the rule of law would grant too
many advantages to the people and deprive aristocrats of their privileged position
(Wu, 104). Yang Jung-kuo goes even further in his examination of Confucius
injunction to “return to the rites” and to follow the ways of the ancient Chou and
Shang dynasties. Confucius recommended this course, Yang argues, because he
favored the interests of the slaveowning aristocracy which had prevailed in earlier
times, but which he saw threatened during his lifetime by the power of a newly
emerging and more progressive class of feudal landlords (Yang, 2627).

Pound was himself interested in both the positive ethical strand and the
authoritarian strand of Confucius’ thought. He saw the Confucian ethic as a forerunner
of the fascist dedication to the task of state-building; he saw Confucius’ own interest
in promoting the unity of China’s empire as a model for Mussolini’s colonial
conquests; and he conceived of the Analects as a textbook for oneman rule. Yet
certainly fascism, imperialism, and the autocratic government which Pound favored
could have been historically justified without reference to Chinese traditions or to
Confucianism in particular. It is difficult to see why the poet felt Western philosophical
traditions and historical experience were unable to provide the foundation for the
kind of society he envisioned. From Plato to Carlyle, Europe produced a number of
thinkers who formulated what we might term “proto-fascist” theories of government.

Nonetheless, Pound carefully examined the Greek and Roman philosophical
traditions and found them inferior, in many respects, to the Chinese. He was hardest
on the Greeks, Plato and Aristotle in particular; and although he placed a higher
value on Roman than on Greek modes of thinking, he rated Chinese social philosophy
as superior to Roman. An analysis of Pound’s comments on Western classical
thought merits close attention if we are to gain a full appreciation of the real
significance of his great interest in China. Pound’s main objection to Greek thought
was that it was too individualistic. He observed,

Plato’s Republic notwithstanding, the greek philosophers did not feel
communal responsibilities vide infra. The sense of coordination of the individual in a milieu is not in them (GK, 38).7

Pound compares what he considers to be a frivolous Greek attitude unfavorably with the less individualistic attitudes of the Romans an China's paramount philosopher.

Rome was the responsible ruler.... The sense of responsibility, the need for coordination of individuals expressed in Kung's teaching differs radically both from early Christian absolutism and from the maritime adventure morals of Odysseus or the loose talk of argumentative greeks (GK, 38).

Thus Greek thought (and Christian thought, in general) are cast aside. The Greeks, in Pound's view, are not to be praised for the invention of democracy; in fact the demise of the first democratic civilization hardly deserves a footnote. Battle of Cheronea. END of Liberty. Achaia a Roman province. Headline or whatever, B.C. 146 (GK, 120).

The political values which were embodied in Achaian civilization could not be used by Pound to bolster anything resembling Mussolini's brand of imperialism, given Athens' failure to expand as effectively as Rome and the ancient state of Chin had done.

Still, Pound had made his case against Greek thought "Plato's Republic notwithstanding." The Republic, with its notion of a dictatorial "philosopher-king," should have been able to provide the perfect model for the society Pound envisioned. But Plato was found insufficient when compared with Confucius, for three important reasons: 1) Confucius, rather than Plato, had the proper attitude toward poetry, 2) Confucius did not suffer from Plato's obsession with otherworldly "Forms," 3) Confucius' political ideals, rather than Plato's, had actually been successfully practiced for thousands of years.

Pound's discomfort with Plato may have mostly been due to the latter's notorious ban on poets in the ideal republic. Not without some venom, Pound remarks on this issue:

Plato the purple swine advocated the expulsion of "poets" (he may have meant Eddy Marsh's gang or blokes who write in the Observer) from his projected republic but he failed to specify that he meant sloppy poets. He was . . . a "prose poet", that is a rhapsodist who shirked verse technique (musical technique) (GK, 128).

Despite his Shelleyean attempt to turn Plato into a "prose poet," or his insistence that Plato "failed to specify he meant sloppy poets," Pound's uneasiness with the supreme Greek philosopher's attitude toward poetry is evident. Confucius on the other hand, specified his preference for poetry. As Pound puts it, "The Duce [Mussolini] and Kung fu Tseu equally perceive that their people need poetry."
"While a failure to "specify," may in itself have been sufficient grounds for Pound’s rejection of Plato, the Greek philosopher’s frequent emphasis on religio-metaphysical notions was hardly less troubling. Pound quotes one of Plato’s dialogues and comments disparagingly upon it, making the point that only anti-social “adolescents” in the West, and perverse “non-Confucians” in the East, have been taken in by metaphysics.

"The heaven which is above the heavens (etc.) no earthly poet (etc.) has sung or ever will sing in a worthy manner."

"The colourless formless and intangible essence is visible to the mind which is the only lord of the soul. Circling around this in the region above the heavens is the place of true knowledge" ET cetera.

This kind of thing from the Phaedrus, or wherever it comes from, undoubtedly excites certain temperaments, or perhaps almost anyone if caught at the right state of adolescence or in certain humors.

For the Western world Plato is the father of this sort of prose rhapsody. And deleterious students can, I suspect, net vast tracts of the same sort of thing in the orient, even (and/or especially) in non-Confucian China

(GK, 222)

What is preferable to Pound in Confucian thought is the sense of social responsibility. Pound agreed with the Italian scholar Fontenelle that Plato’s ideas are socially irresponsible and impracticable, and he contrasted the Greek’s failure with the successful implementation of the Chinese philosopher’s ideals.

Yet after 2000 and more years, Fontenelle observed that not even a half-masted tyrant wd. give Plato a ten acre lot whereon to try out his republic. In contrast we hear that whenever and wherever order has been set up in China: whenever there has been a notable reform or constructive national action, you find a group of Confucians “behind it”, or at the centre.

(GK,32)

Some of Pound’s objections to Plato did not apply to Aristotle, since the latter thoroughly approved of poets, and was not interested in the otherworldly. Pound grudgingly admits, in the opening section of the Guide to Kulchur, that Aristotle’s ideas have had a positive impact on Western thought, but he makes it clear that he finds his social views politically irresponsible.

Aristotle was so good at his job that he anchored human thought for 2000 years. What he didn’t define clearly remained a muddle for the rest of the race, for centuries following. But he did not engender a sense of social responsibility.

This is not a stricture on what he said. You can find worthy suggestions about conduct in both Aristotle and Plato.

I just don’t remember ‘em at the moment (GK, 39)

Pound never does remember very much worth praising in Aristotle’s thought, especially when compared with Confucius. Aristotle may be praised when it comes
to his aesthetic, which is definitely preferable to Plato’s. But Pound’s approval is often backhanded, as when he says, “In any case the dirty Greek perks up when he gets to art and intellectual subtleties, being a philosophy prof.” (GK, 327).

Pound’s overall disapproval of Aristotle is, in large part, based on the fact that he never held a political office of any sort, whereas Confucius did occupy an appointed magisterial position, if only for a short time. Consequently, in Pound’s view, the Chinese philosopher’s outlook rests on a practical ethical foundation, while Aristotle’s tends toward intricate, but surface-level, abstractions.

As a working hypothesis say that Kung is superior to Aristotle by totalitarian instinct. His thought is never something scaled off the surface of facts. It is root volition branching out, the ethical weight present in every phrase.

The chief justice had to think more soberly than the tutor and lecturer (GK, 279).

Pound makes it clear elsewhere that this view is more than a “working hypothesis.” At one point he says that Aristotle “is not fit to clean the boots of Confucius” (GK, 326). Later he goes so far as to intimate that Aristotle’s philosophy is subversive in a way that Confucius’ never could be.

My imaginary opponent may say: well, Aristotle preaches the doctrine of the mean. Kung, however, of the mean that stands fast. And without the abominable mixture of weeds and loose language. Your historical notes should tell you that the Nichomachean treatise (or notes for lectures on ethical nomenclature?) was composed during a decadence, the greeks had already collapsed. Conscious or unconscious subversivism? (GK, 315).

Later, Pound qualifies the innuendo, saying, “You can’t prove, and so far as I know no one has ever suggested, that [Aristotle] was deliberately or consciously subversive.” But the charge of subconscious subversion still stands. At another point, Pound speaks to the issue more directly, saying of the Nicomachean Ethics, If we accept Schopenhauer’s acid test for writers, the work is bad. It is heteroclite, a hodge-podge of astute comment and utter bosh, material for a sottiser, but above all subversive, morally bad (GK, 308).

Pound genuinely believes that Aristotle’s work is anti-social, probably because the Greek philosopher takes the idea of democracy seriously. He had contrasted him with Confucius, who was “totalitarian by instinct.” Elsewhere, Pound contrasts Aristotle’s social philosophy with Mussolini’s “totalitarian formulae,” blaming unspecified fascist inadequacies on the continuing influence of Aristotle’s philosophy.

I wd. go even further and state in parenthesis, with the date April 16 anno XV, that the things still needing to be remedied in the Italian State are due to an Aristotelic residuum left in Mussolini’s own mind.

Despite all he has sloughed off in evolving his totalitarian formulae, (GK, 309).

Through the course of writing the Guide to Kulchur it seems that Pound’s
disapproval of Aristotle comes eventually to take the form of an uncontrollable aversion. Aristotle's "crap" is often contrasted with Confucian works, such as the Ta Hio, which is above criticism.

Aristotle's hedging, backsliding and filling, if you compare it with a true work like the Ta Hio, is a give away. This bloke, were he alive today, wd be writing crap for the "utilities." He has lasted because "like to like." He is not a man with truth in him. (GK, 306).

The contrast with the flawless Confucian works is further highlighted when Pound remarks that in the middle of reading Book III of the Ethics he was ready to chuck up the job, as a waste of my time ... (This feeling I have had neither with the Analects nor the Chi King.) (GK, 319).

Pound's observations on Plato, Aristotle, and Greek philosophy obviously do not constitute a wholesale condemnation of Western thought. Despite his clear preference for Confucian philosophy, it should not be forgotten that Pound often contrasts Greek abstraction with Roman practical wisdom. Concerning the Greek thinkers he notes,

Whatever these worthy highbrows may have meant, their gross weight in human history has left occidental man with a belief that Aristotle was THE typical highbrow, dissecting, hyperintellectual, inhuman. And Plato, the great grandfather of purple patches, of prose written as cynosure for Longinus.

The love of wisdom, or the responsibility that carries wisdom into details of action, is not a Greek glory but a Roman (GK, 40).

Pound, it seems, could have found full historical justification for his totalitarian rappel al l'ordre in a thorough exposition of Roman history. Indeed, the Pax Romana was for Pound unquestionably a glorious age, despite the fact (or because of the fact) that common people were virtually denied any role in governing under the Imperial system.

Grant tentatively that the welfare of the common people was not the first care of the emperors, it wd. still be impossible to deny the provisions taken time after time to establish effective and beneficent order; from which the total people derived benefits greater than occidental history had known before the Pax Romana (GK, 43).

Yet, even given the superiority of the Roman penchant for order over Greek social irresponsibility, Pound still had serious doubts about Roman civilization. His preference for China over Rome was based primarily on three observations: 1) Rome, unlike China, suffered a relatively early decline, 2) Latin, by its nature, is a less universal language than Chinese, and 3) Too much of Roman history was the history of a republic for Pound to be comfortable with it.

Although the decline of the Roman social order was of supreme political importance to Pound, he analyzed it mainly as a cultural problem. In the Cantos; he
observes that “Barbarians enjoyed Roman calamities” (96.655). He notes the
cultural chaos through which Rome passed, reffering to the “Roman Chriisters,” to
the “pseudo roman” and then the “later moslem” phase (97.670). He also refers to
the influence of such diverse groups as the Goths and the Egyptians (94.635). Such
a chaotic socio-historical process may be contrasted with the rather neat development
of Chinese civilization as depicted in the “China Cantos,” where invading influences
are absorbed or made subservient to Confucianism. The severity of the West’s
cultural crisis, for Pound, could be observed in the early death of creative philosophical
thought, as it became divorced from praxis.

... by 200 B.C. the scope of Western thought has been more or less
outlined.

It could be argued that the “main ideas” were all present in Greek
philosophy, that they had all been threshed out and are more or less clearly
presented even in the remains of greek philosophy than they can be from a
study of what is called “Christian philosophy”

Yet in a sense the philosophers gave way to Christianity (however
much a few of them colored it or even shaped it directly) (GK, 25).

In Pound’s view, the divorce between philosophy and life in Western thought
did not obtain in China; in fact, he prefaces the above observations saying that they
can only be made by comparing the West to China.

If you consider the occident, or all European or Mediterranean life for
2500 years, as something to be watched in a test tube, you might make the
following clinical observations on successive phases of process. As against
China or as much as France knew of China in 1837 . . . (GK, 24).

While Rome did, for a time, offer social order and provide a model of social
responsibility, Pound sees a decline in thought from the Greeks; and although there
are numerous exemplary Roman political figures, such as Antoninus, Constantine
and Justinian, the divorce between “life” and “wisdom,” which characterizes Western
thought, compels him to opt for Confucian China.

The distinction I am trying to make is this. Rightly or wrongly, we feel
that Confucius offers a way of life, an Anschauung or disposition towards
nature and man and a system for dealing with both.

The occident as a result of 1900 years of fact and process feels this way
toward Christianity, but not toward any brand of philosophy. Philosophy as
the word is currently used means a highbrow study, something cut off both
from life and wisdom (GK, 24).

To make matters worse for the occident in this comparison, Roman culture
has, linguistically speaking, ceased to exist. Cultural and political values which
might unite European civilization can no longer be conveyed by a single living
language which has remained intact since classical times. Hence Pound’s enthusiasm
for the ideographic as aspects of the Chinese writing system.

Latin having by 1830 ceased to be the lingua franca of Western
Now we WANT the ideograms (GK, 205).

The fact that Chinese has long been and continues to be a universal idiom, spoken by hundreds of millions, makes the entirety of Roman history seem almost insignificant, as if it were a long forgotten, failed cultural experiment.

As to the humanities, other points being equal, what comparison can there be between a means of communication with 400 million living beings and a dead language never spoken by a fifth of that number at any time (GK, 314).

The last serious objection to Roman civilization as a model derives from its long history as a republican state. In the Guide to Kulchur, where Pound makes his most pointed comparisons between oriental and occidental civilization, he also makes clear his forceful opposition to elected assemblies. But Pound’s discomfiture with several hundred years of Roman republican government is best seen in the omission of any mention of it. Of the great Roman historians, Livy and Tacitus, only the latter, who did not write extensively of the Republic, is mentioned in the Cantos or the Guide to Kulchur. One reference to Tacitus in the Cantos reveals, yet again, Pound’s extreme uneasiness with popular institutions. Referring to democratic theory, the line runs “... doubted by Tacitus though he admits the theory is a good one” (67-393). Terrell explains,

Tacitus praised the idea of a republic ruled by a governor, a senate and a house of representatives, although he doubted the “practicability” or “duration” of such a division

(Terrell, p. 320. 67/393. 135).

The omission of any mention of Livy and his monumental History of Rome from its Foundation, which covered the period from about 800 B.C. to 9 B.C., is noteworthy. But this should not be surprising given that Livy’s stated aim, from Book Two and onwards, is
to trace the history in peace and war of a free nation, governed by annually elected officers of state, and subject not to the caprice of individual men, but to the overriding authority of law

(Livy, 2. 1).

Despite the attraction which Rome’s imperial ascent had for Pound, the fact that the expansion occurred, for the most part, under Republican governance, forced him to reject Rome as a perfect model. Livy’s strong emphasis on democratic values must have annoyed Pound. Hence the omission of any reference to Rome’s most comprehensive historian, Tacitus, who devoted himself largely to the task of depicting life under a tyrannical form of government, hardly loomed large in Pound’s conception of history. Pound mentions him in the ABC of Reading when he says,

Rome rose with the idiom of Caesar, Ovid and Tacitus, she declined in a welter of rhetoric, the diplomats’ “language to conceal thought,”...
But since the decline of Rome began to occur, not long after the Republic ceased to exist, Pound evinces very little interest in the issue of Rome’s democratic institutions. The poet’s conception of Chinese history was not confused by such vagaries. Pound believed that a political philosophy based on Confucianism will recognize what is obvious and arch-obvious and triple obvious: parliaments as now run (Parliament, U.S. House of Representatives and Senate) are... obsolete (GK, 173).

This is because, as Machiavelli Senior remarked: “Men live in a few, and the rest are sheep.” The idealists struggle against that. An occasional miracle happens. In China men have set up a series of dynasties. Acts of heroic creation... (Doob, 287-288). Pound thought the dynasties, upheld by Confucian political philosophy, were superior models of government because no allowance was made even for the possibility of a democratic assembly, or “jaw-house” (GK, 173). Confucius himself had said, “The people may be made to follow a path of action, but they may not be made to understand it ” (Analects, Bk VIII, Ch IX). Pound, no doubt, agreed. The ideograph for “the people” employed in the Confucian texts, and by Pound in the Cantos, is min which represents a creeping plant that multiplies quickly. If “the people” are metaphorically equated with vegetable life then they are certainly unfit for democracy. The ideograph for one of the Confucian virtues mentioned earlier, righteousness, is derived from the image of a sheep. For Pound the image lent credence to Machiavelli’s view that men are docile and ignorant, fit like sheep only to be herded. According to the poet neither Greek nor Roman, nor any other Western tradition can be used, by itself, to guide the process of social change. He emphasized that only a political philosophy based on an understanding of Confucian dynastic political practice will yield proper results.

When the principles here defined were neglected dynasties waned and chaos ensued. The proponents of a world order will neglect at their peril the study of the only process that has repeatedly proved its efficiency as social coordinate [emphasis added] (Con., 97).

Pound was certainly correct, and ahead of his time, in arguing that the West should have a greater interest in Chinese philosophical thought. Where he erred, however, is in his insistence that what the West needed to learn from China is how to perfect “totalitarian formulae.” Pound’s gross simplification of Chinese history in the “China Cantos” (where over 4,000 years are summarized in several dozen pages) is dominated by one idea: the Confucians are always heroes while the Taoists and Buddhists are always villains set on destroying the social order. The poet was oblivious to the positive contributions of such figures as Lao Tze, Chuang Tze, and...
Han Fei Tze. Pound errs in seeing China as having a completely monolithic history dominated by only one positive philosophy, Confucianism. But Pound is also mistaken in failing to differentiate between the various types of Confucian thought, and in failing to see that Confucianism itself has been modified by China’s other philosophies. He was more interested in a totalitarian myth which he could derive from the selective study of Chinese history and from a narrow interpretation of the Confucian classics.

Because Pound’s own brand of Confucianism was ultraconservative it could easily be equated with his idealized view of fascism. Conversely, because Pound had an idealized view of what life was like under the rule of Confucian Chinese Emperors, he could easily equate this view with his projected image of life in a fascist Europe, under the likes of Mussolini and Hitler. The result was a gross misuse of the philosophy of Confucius, which is by no means a model for cross-cultural borrowing by men of letters. Nevertheless, the study of Pound’s work will remain important in the future for scholars of both Chinese and of Euro-American literature, because it will compel them to examine the ways in which cross-cultural transference occurs.

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NOTES

1 書經

2 “Ta Hio” is a French spelling for 馬學 Ta Hsüeh, known in English as the “Great Digest.”

3 Spring and Autumn Annals, 722-481 BC. Confucius lived from 551-479 BC.

4 All the characters mentioned here were used by Pound in the Cantos.

5 Western Chou, 1027-771 BC. Shang, 1600-771 BC.

6 For a sympathetic view of Confucius, consult Waley and Legge. For examination of the historical development of the critique of Confucius, see Wu Tien-wei and Kam Louie.

7 Guide to Kulchur.

8 Deliberate misspellings, such as “dhierty” for “dirty” and “subilties” for “sublteties” are so numerous in Pound’s prose writings that I have chosen not to designate them “sic.” Pound deliberately misspells very often when his intention is to ridicule or malign his subject.