

CONFUCIUS: FROM LITERATURE TO WISDOM¹

孔子: 从文学到智慧

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By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.

Confucius

By reflecting upon different perspectives of literature – as well as of wisdom –, one can think that the chosen title might be, to some extent, backwards. That is, instead of “from literature to wisdom”, we could have written “from wisdom to literature”, which, even so, wouldn’t be entirely correct, since we are confronted with the fact that Confucius, like other great masters of knowledge (such as Socrates and Jesus Christ), has written nothing. We know, however, what history, in the West, has done to Socrates – starting from the portrait set by Plato. Likewise, what we know from the start about Confucius was the portrait set by his disciples, which is mistaken with the information that comes from the fact he was worshiped, for over two thousand years, by Emperors of

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China, where, to a large extent, he was placed as a quasi-religious figure, if we use a concept that is more typical of the West – in the East, that “religious” particularity isn’t entirely so apparent. On the other hand, that imperial worshiping has caused effects in Confucius’ thought, by the association that it was made to a certain idea of tyranny of a “feudal” type – as a matter of fact, similar to what happened in the West with the figure of Christ, from the moment when Christianity became of the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Confucius considered himself as/was considered to be the “spokesman” of the wisdom of the classics, that, in the Eastern context, but not as much in the Western one, refers to a wisdom expressed in an already established oral tradition. There would then be a wisdom prior to Confucius, that he will recover and disseminate. But, here too, an approach to some ideas regarding the very idea of “classic” is necessary. The classic works can be considered as the ones whose interpretation remains opened, in the sense that they surpass time and can be constantly reread and reinterpreted, which explains, in fact, that known formula according to which, more than “reading, what matters is to reread”. In times of – at least apparent – general disorientation, the classics, whether from the West or the East, can bring more light here: a classic, as Calvino wrote, is “a book that has never finished saying what it has to say” [...].

The glosses accumulated by cultures, and that equally justify and structure those which nurture and inspire them, even if they can give rise to the most diverse misunderstandings. Calvino continues: “A classic is a work which constantly generates a pulviscular cloud of critical discourse around it, but which always shakes the particles off.”

But these are, to a great extent, curiously the works of the classics: because they enrich, transform, even if, at times, they also deform, always rebuilding themselves as avatars of an identity. Because they survive more to the erosion of time, of history, to the oblivion of the writing, of the own language. They survive, one would say, “in spirit”. Aulus Gellius, in “*Attic Nights*”, refers to a first meaning of “classic”, as the citizen qualified as noble, as aristocratic, as the one above normal, above average. However, this word will be used synecdochically, in the Middle Ages, as what is worthy of being “given in class” (not necessarily meaning “the best”), which accentuates the ambiguity of the term (cf. Aguiar e Silva, 2002, pp. 503-504).

It is from the sixteenth century on, when the printed literature appears in the Western languages, that it will acquire the meaning of Author, thus allowing

to speak of what “survives time” (also, to a certain extent, the author), therefore freeing itself from the chronology (Antiquity/Modernity), by associating itself to the eternity of the written text and disseminated by the printed book.

Confucius would thus definitely be a classic, because he is above average, but not only. He is also a classic because he was and still is being studied “in class”, in the Eastern, Chinese, culture at least until the “Cultural Revolution” – but still today, for a certain revivalism, or for strategic rhetoric.

Confucius is still a classic to the extent that, by transitioning from an oral to a written and bookish culture, whatever path one may take to speak of him, we are always confronted with his work’s “perpetuity”, which is also a way for us to mention his Excellence and, to a large extent, his universality and possible eternity.

In any case, we have some difficulties to come near a univocal notion of “classic”, in which superiority and universality are considered as synonyms. It’s a thought that was originally written in Mandarin Chinese, translated into other languages, namely the Western languages, raising, here, the question of that same thought was brought into the mental universe of the West, in whose cultural structure has historically consolidated itself, in some cases, quite diversely. When a Western critic classifies Confucius as “classic” or refers his connection to “classics”, which connotation of “classic” (Latin word) is he referring to? Now, much the same ambiguity derives from the word literary or literature.

The word “literature” comes from the word “littera”, letter. Aguiar e Silva (2002, pp. 1-2) says that it appeared for the first time in the sixteenth century, designating everything that was printed, without any dominant aesthetics marking the word. In fact, today, we can still mention the example of the “enclosed literature”, that appears, for example, inside the medicine packaging. Effectively, “literature” means a type of culture that was recorded by writing and not rarely is defined by the existence of the printed text. The term literature gains an aesthetic connotation only at the end of the eighteenth century. Literature is not quite used for what it means (the “belles-lettres”), but mainly because the concept of “belles-lettres” is starting to be broadened to the prose texts, namely to the novel. Until the eighteenth century, the word used was, curiously, “poetry”, and all the reflection on the art of the word was divided between Poetics and Rhetoric.

Can we then say that Confucius is an author of Literature? And in what sense? Why did he recorded in writing the wisdom of an oral tradition of the

Chinese culture? But it should be noted that the press phenomena in China preceded the emergence of the press in the West. Is Confucius a literary author because he has an aesthetic value? For sure, but it is also because he has elements of prose and poetry, keeping, today, the “prose”, a set of texts related to the utilitarian everyday language, even “prosaic”, in the meaning of what is more common.

Can we also fit Confucius in Philosophy? It's because, likewise, to consider “philosophy” as a notion of wisdom (*sophia*), precisely when we refer ourselves to the thought of Confucius', through the difference between the West and the East, it is also equally challenging. This question might seem resolvable, by resorting to a synonymy between Philosophy and the elaboration of a critical thought. In fact, in the Western culture, there's a difference between *filo-sophia* and *sophia*. The word *sophia* exists, but also exists independently from *filo-sophia*. This Western notion of philosophy presupposes something that doesn't exist in the Eastern one, that it is, still, wisdom. It is, however, a *philos*, which implies, for that reason, a specific love to things, a perception presupposed in the comprehension. To learn is not enough, not even to comprehend, in the sense of presupposing the absorption of the “thing” as an “object”. It is a perception, a sign of property that, simultaneously, brings the subject closer and farther away from his/her object.

[...]

It is now, for sure, necessary to ask whether the consideration of Confucius as a philosopher fits in such mental universe, given that he focuses himself on a kind of wisdom, whose form of comprehension and transmission is of appropriation of the thing, of the wisdom of the things and of the world. Among us, a philosophy, such as that of Agostinho da Silva, causes, still today, that doubt: was he a philosopher? Philosopher or not, he is for sure a wise person, and the fact that Agostinho da Silva wrote about Confucius³ and him being an indelible mark in his thought, is perhaps no coincidence.

Obviously, we are here speaking of a notion of Philosophy that, in the West, became established mainly with the advent of Modernity and Science.

³ O Sábio Confúcio (The wise person Confucius), Lisbon, ed. from the author, 1943. See also: O Budismo (Buddhism), ed. from the author, 1940; Vida de Vivekanada (The Life of Vivekanada), Lisbon, ed. from the author, 1944; História do Japão (History of Japan), Lisbon, ed. from the author, 1944.

Before that, Philosophy, in the West, had more similarities than differences in relation to the East.

To understand Confucius in the West, we should perhaps go back to the beginning to the history of Philosophy in the West, and take up a parallel that was already mentioned here: between Confucius and Socrates. It's because in Socrates – or, more precisely, in Plato – we can find a way to return to the question of the incidability between “classicism” / “literature” / “philosophy”. Therefore, we will say that the transition from the classic to the literary and from the literary to the philosophical can be pondered in the light of an ascending dialectic. Inversely, the transition from the philosophical to the literary and from the literary to the classic can be pondered in the light of a descending dialectic. In either case, it is necessary to give voice to a common thread that bonds the oral and written culture to the literary and philosophical culture, because it's the only way that that common thread can be shared. Literature would be, in this context, the way to give voice to wisdom and share it. It would be important, still today, or today, more than ever, to perceive literature, oral or written, this way.

Throughout the history of China, there wasn't, for sure, no other author so relevant. The profound influence of Confucius on the Chinese culture has also inspired the peoples of Eastern Asia and, without a doubt, will still remain today as a cornerstone of the most ancient living civilization. In the West, for its influence over so many centuries, the Bible is the only comparable work.

When we speak of Confucius' work, or the Bible, we obviously also speak of precepts and literary and philosophical reflections, systematised in a broad and varied set of verses. In the Confucian literature, that set was named “Four Books”, which, aiming perhaps, firstly, at the attainment of wisdom, they do so for the individual improvement of the deep relationship between the content and its form, its rhetorical “figures” connected to the sound and then to the grapheme. In Confucius, that is noticeable in the attention that is given to the Classics, to the Rites, and to the Music. Secondly, and in accordance to what Confucius labelled as a “second age”, the thinking focuses on the improvement of the human being through the exercise of virtue and righteousness (the fundamental principle of his ethics), through the specific and actual exercise of virtue and righteousness.

The wisdom and the “Good Governance”, are concerns that reinforce the Confucian attitude of attentiveness and connection to temporal “reality” – it is

not an abstract ethics, but a maximally concrete one, because it is maximally focused and connected the behaviour of the individual towards the “real”. Although his notion of human being is not of an individual nature, in the same sense in which the “individual” is regarded in the West, that is, although the moral perfection is based on the desire of improvement of living together, we should not fail, once again, to bring the reading of Confucius near to an exercise of Confucius, in a similar way to the one that happens in the religious text, even though Confucianism may not be a religion. It’s the exercise of virtue that makes the human being capable of guiding himself, and governing well, and being governed by others. Whoever improves himself/herself is, in that same act, promoting the wellbeing of everyone, the common good. Once more, we find here a parallel with Plato: the Supreme Leader, the King, should be the Philosopher King, the Wise King. Consequently, the “Good Prince”, the basis of a Good Government, is the one who cultivates the higher values of Justice, Loyalty, and Attentiveness, qualities of the wiseman and, ideally, of the Leader. In both Socrates and Confucius, a similar idea of “*res publica*”, of public thing, that each part is only a part, is formed.

It is in this sense that quotes from Confucius such as “The best way to be happy is to contribute to the happiness of others” could come close to the socratic-platonic notion of harmony. Or that, quotes from Confucius such as “[...] when you do not know a thing, to acknowledge that you do not know it — this is knowledge.” (Analects, bk. ii., c. xvii.)” can come close to “I know that I know nothing”, allegedly said by Socrates, the philosopher who refused to write, so the word could be exercised.

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