The Construction of Wu Mi's Literary Philosophy: The Integration of Humanism into Chinese Confucianism

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Received: May 3, 2023 Accepted: June 23, 2023 Online Published: June 30, 2023

doi:10.5539/ells.v13n3p23 URL: https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v13n3p23

Abstract

Wu Mi, a believer in humanism, and student of Irving Babbitt, loved traditional Eastern and Western cultures and advocated the "continuity and convergence" of literature. This is an ideology of fair and just treatment of the different cultures of the East and the West, externally opposing drastic cultural changes but internally pursuing the continuity of ancient and modern culture and the integration of Eastern and Western cultures. Due to its fierce criticism of "old literature" in the New Culture Movement, Wu Mi's literary philosophy was considered old-fashioned and anachronistic at the beginning of the 20th century. On the contrary, Wu Mi had no bias toward the literature of the past and present, East and West, which is a significant step toward understanding in culture and its development, during turbulent and chaotic times.

Keywords: Wu Mi's literary philosophy, humanism, Chinese Confucianism, continuity, convergence

1. Introduction

Humanism is the most important source of Wu Mi's cultural thought. Wu Mi (1935) himself once said "My inspiration and strength of struggle come from the West" (p. 197). The "West" in this context refers to the humanism represented by Irving Babbitt and Paul More. Growing up in a Chinese Confucian culture, Wu Mi combined humanism with Chinese Confucianism, advocating the stability and continuity of ancient and modern culture, opposing radical cultural change, and arguing that this was the only correct direction for the future development of Chinese culture. "It is the only correct way to save the world and teach the people, regardless of east or west, governance or chaos" (Wu Mi, 2006, p.79). This stood in contrast to the wave of New Culture Movement, which focused on overthrowing traditional culture. As a result, Wu Mi, a Westernized scholar who studied at the University of Virginia and Harvard University, returned to China with a "conservative" image.

The influence of humanists such as Irving Babbitt and Paul More on Wu Mi's literary philosophy has been well recognized in academic circles. In the work *The New American Humanism Propagated by Wu Mi During the May Fourth Period*, Wang Xiaolin (2021) compares the new American humanism propagated by Wu Mi with the evolutionary literary criticism, John Dewey's pragmatism and Winchester's literary criticism (p. 174). What's more, in *A Preliminary Study of Wu Mi's Reading History with More as the Center and the Diversity of American Humanism*, Cao Qian (2023) says that Wu Mi's continuous reading of More's writings for more than fifty years is the clear indication of the importance of More to Wu Mi's thoughts (pp. 174–193). But few scholars have studied about how Wu Mi's literary philosophy has been constructed.

2. Humanism in Wu Mi's Literary Philosophy

Humanism in Wu Mi's Literary Philosophy begins with a critique of vernacular literature. According to Wu Mi, the outer form of expression of vernacular works had changed significantly, and the "propaganda function" of literature had been strengthened, but the inner beauty of literature had regressed. He divided the literary works into four types: propaganda literature, gossip literature, pastime literature, and special or sectarian literature, the shortcomings of which were: "(a) No Religious, mystic, or tragic experience. (b) No profound philosophy. (c) No magnificent writings" (Wu Mi, 1998, compiled by Wu Xuezhao, p. 35). In Wu Mi's opinion, the best literary works should contain the most abundant, meaningful, and interesting parts of life, and be handled with artistic beauty, so that they can give a strong and moving impression of truth and beauty, and make the reader both

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edified, enlightened, and entertained (Wu Mi, 1993, Wang Minyuan, trans., p. 21). The literary genres are diverse, but whether poetry or fiction, in Wu Mi's view, the literary concepts are the same in them.

2.1 The Development of Literature Needs to be Continued

In 1895, Chinese scholar Yan Fu published the article *Original Strength of Life*, which introduced Darwin's "natural selection" and "survival of the fittest" to China, and the theory of evolution gradually became one of the most influential Western thoughts in modern Chinese history. The scholars who advocated the New Culture Movement applied the theory of evolution to literature, arguing that "new literary works" were naturally better than "old ones". In her book *The Introduction of Western Literary Theories into China, 1919–1925*, Bonnie S. McDougall stated that Chinese writers believed that the development of European literature had gone through the stages of classicism, romanticism, realism, naturalism, and neo-romanticism (Fei Zhengqing, quoted in Bonnie S. McDougall, 1994, p. 482). For these stages of literary development in European literary history, many Chinese scholars see them as an evolutionary process.

In the context of Chinese scholars' eagerness to change the status quo, the time has become the best watershed, and "tradition" has become synonymous with "old-fashioned" and "decadent", and "old" itself means elimination and abandonment, so many scholars are not only uninterested in Chinese classical literature but also lack of interest in Western classical-ism. The theory of evolution in culture met the expectations of the people. From the perspective of "humanistic values", Wu Mi (1922) opposed those who viewed culture from new and old, and argued that the stages of classicism, romanticism, realism, and naturalism were not a process of continuous evolution, but rather "a cycle of succession in a certain order" (p. 22). The cultural achievements of the predecessors are the cornerstones of the successors, and the latter must stand on the shoulders of the former to move forward. The division of literary works into old and new in terms of time is a typical manifestation of artificially cutting off history and culture. Of course, this does not mean that he defended all traditional cultures. What he opposed is the direct application of the Western evolutionary doctrine of "survival of the fittest" to education and literature, that is, "to append it to the two realms of heaven and man, is a great mistake" (Wu Mi, 1993, Wang Minyuan, trans., p. 80). He believed that the real development of literature should be "imitation". In his opinion, if the great authors of the past and present when they were young, imitated the form, followed the example of their predecessors, and were regulated by the rules, they would learn from the spirit, and later gradually were able to create their ideas. (Wu Mi, 1922, p. 22) The new literary works imitate the old ones. The former and the latter are not "superiority and inferiority", but rather a relationship of continuity and succession.

Wu Mi's "imitation" is a combination of humanism and Chinese Confucianism's "Inheritance and Revolution" theory. The theory originates from *The Analects of Confucius—For the Government* by Confucius', "The Yin is based on the Xia rites, and the gains and losses can be understood. If the Zhou is based on the Yin rituals, the gains and losses will be known" (Yang Bojun, 1980, pp. 21–22). Confucius discussed the development of rites from a historical perspective in the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, and he believed that the evolution of rites was the result of the interaction of the "cause and the effect of the revolution". Confucius believed that the evolution of rites was a result of the interaction of the "Inheritance and Revolution", that is, the inheritance of political and cultural, and moral aspects that were generally accepted as suitable for social development, and the removal of aspects that were not conducive to social development. At the same time, Confucius also proposed Zhou was supervised by the second generation, which was so gloomy, so he followed Zhou (Yang Bojun, 1980, p. 28). The Zhou rites, which were borrowed from the Xia and Yin dynasties, had reached a relatively high level and would be difficult for future generations to surpass, so he supported the Zhou rites.

Wu Mi's theory of "imitation" holds that literature is constantly evolving. The new literature is not created out of nothing but based on old literature, and that new must not be severed from old. In the process of literary development, old literature may reach a higher level in a certain era, and the new does not necessarily outperform the old. He considered the classical literature of the East and the West to be the highest in the course of literary development, and therefore he particularly admired such sages as Confucius in China and Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in ancient Greece.

2.2 The Literature Needs to Disclose Human Nature

According to Wu Mi, literature is derived from life, which does not refer specifically to the life of an individual, but to the overall value of human society. Therefore, Wu Mi's literary thought can be classified as "humanistic" to a certain extent. His literary philosophy focuses on humanity because, on the one hand, humanism itself is based on "human beings"; on the other hand, it is also due to the awakening of "humanity" in China in the 1920s and 1930s. It's centered on "life", but this does not mean that literature is history, a direct record of the real experiences of human life. A literary work must, in general, be 'created', imagined, producing a complete

illusion. And the details can be factual and derived from experience. The value of a literary work does not lie in the subject (material), but in the writing (art). All subjects are equally good.

A good literary work shows the writer's overall conception of life and the universe, rather than his judgment of some specific people and events (Wu Mi, 1993, Wang Minyuan, trans., p. 19).

Wu Mi suggested that the novel should present the writer's overall cultural concept extracted from life and the universe, characterized by truth and love. In his novel *Old and New Karma*, for example, Wu Mi wanted to use Buddhism and Plato's philosophy as the basis for observing and describing life and to make an autobiography that is free of traces and transformation. The essence of his knowledge and experience, his insights into life and love, his moral and religious aspirations, and his achievements in writing and poetry were all included in it (Wu Mi, 1998, compiled by Wu Xuezhao, p. 263). From his diaries, it is clear that Wu Mi wanted to incorporate moral, philosophical, and life-thinking ideas into his literary works, which should both originate from life and contain life philosophies, realizing the purpose of literature to reflect on life and show human nature.

2.3 The Expression of Literary Forms Should Be Elegant

Wu Mi always wrote in classical Chinese, which he considered to be the best form of expression for literary works. He grew up in a time when all kinds of cultural ideas were competing in China. He was not against vernacular although he opposed the replacement of traditional literary texts with vernacular in New Cultural Movement. On the contrary, Wu Mi began reading the Chinese Vernacular newspaper at the age of sixteen, and he had a positive attitude towards good vernacular works, even praising them. Wu Mi was interested in Xu Zhimo's vernacular poems with beautiful rhythms, which he considered representative of new materials and forms. He also gave high praise to *Midnight*, one of Mao Dun's vernacular novels in terms of its structure, characters, and language. Wu Mi compared his novel *Eclipses* with *Dream of Red Mansions* by Cao Xueqin. The reasons why Wu Mi admired *Eclipses* are as follows. Firstly, *Eclipses* is a valuable historical novel. Secondly, the book is both a political and a romantic novel, with so much about women's love that it can be considered as another *Dream of Red Mansions* of the twentieth century. Therefore, it is also a valuable romance novel. Thirdly, as for its writing, although it uses the new contemporary vernacular, it is written by Chinese intellectuals who have read the old books, which fits to the taste of his generation. It was, like the vernacular in Lu Xun, Qu Qubai, and the first two volumes of *Mao Zedong's Collections*, different from that in recent years (Wu Mi, 2006, compiled by Wu Xuezhao, p. 48).

Similarly, Wu Mi also recognized Lao She's long vernacular novel *Camel Xiangzi* and gave it high praise. It is clear from Wu Mi's comments on these vernacular novels that he was not opposed to literature written in the vernacular. In the preface to *The Wuhan Daily News—Literary Supplement*, edited by Wu Mi in 1946, he addressed that the journal was not bound by style or form, which was a mixture of Classical language style, ancient Chinese vernacular, and either imitation of ancient times or Europeanization. Articles can be concise or understandable, elegant or vulgar, solemn or harmonious, which are acceptable if they have elements of truth, goodness, and beauty (Wu Mi, 1946). His student Liu Zhaoji asked Wu Mi if he was still opposed to vernacular poetry in his later years. Wu Mi was upset and raised his voice, "What I object to is the old rhythmic poetry with no poetic flavor" (Liu Zhaoge, 1999, p. 142). In Wu Mi's view, all literary works of the East and the West, ancient and modern, are equal. Both vernacular and classical Chinese is only a form of expression in a literary work. To evaluate the literary work is to see if it has the traits of "truth, goodness, and beauty". In fact, during the New Culture Movement, most vernacular literature was so poor that even Hu Shi, the advocate of the New Culture Movement, thought it needed to be improved. On September 11, 1920, Hu Shih delivered a speech at the commencement ceremony of Peking University:

There is no culture now, let alone a new culture... Now there are two directions of movement: (a) popularization; (b) improvement. I encourage an improvement because the popularization of knowledge is shallow, supplying others with a few new terms everywhere. University students should hurry up to learn and open up the door to doing research. I hope that from now on, try to improve yourself instead of popularization." I hope that from now on, efforts should be made for the work of improvement rather than the work of popularization (Second Historical Archives of China, 2008, p. 50).

From his speech, Hushi believed that students needed to improve their academics and should not just create some new terms to please the public, which is consistent with Wu Mi's view that the artistic level of the vernacular needed to be improved.

2.4 Literature Needs to Embody Value and Utility

Wu Mi was a scholar who believed in the spirit of independence and freedom of thought, but this does not mean

that Wu Mi was free from political affairs. On the contrary, he was a scholar who was actively involved in social affairs and this was also true for the value of literature (Wu Mi, 1993, Wang Minyuan, trans., p. 59). He decomposed the functions of literature into ten categories, namely, "nourishing the mind, cultivating morality, understanding human feelings, knowledge of world affairs, presenting national character, increasing patriotism, determining policies, transferring customs, creating a harmonious world, and promoting true civilization" (Wu Mi, 1993, Wang Minyuan, trans., p. 59). These ten functions essentially consist of three levels. The first is the value of literature for people. Wu Mi summarized it by saying that it "nourishes the mind, cultivates morality, understands human feelings, and knows world affairs". From the author's point of view, nourishing the mind is "to express injustice", and as in *Preface to Poetry*, the author believed that the poet's will was in the heart but emotions in the speech. "If the words are not enough to express emotions, sighing could be helpful; If sighing is not enough, try singing; if singing can not reach, dancing could work" (Anonymous, 1912, p. 546). From the reader's point of view, it is through the reading literature that he could give vent to his feelings for restoring the balance of his mind. "Cultivating morality" means that literature is not just about expressing feelings, but also spreading the idea of truth, goodness, and beauty. This kind of communication is not dogmatic preaching but "immersing", which is a kind of natural inner cultivation. The "understanding of human feelings" is not what's usually considered for worldly affairs, but refers to a "universal humanity" which is a combination of universality and generality, and must have both typical and universal significance. The term "knowledge of worldly affairs" means that literature provides information (knowledge) about political and social conditions in the past and the present (Wu Mi, 1993, Wang Minyuan, trans., p. 59).

Literature cannot be divorced from its time. It provides sufficient social knowledge and experience. It's not limited to regions, times, or borders, but be able to reflect universal humanity. Wu Mi believed that *Dream of Red Mansions* by Cao Xueqin and *The Scholars* by Wu Jingzi and *History of Britain* by Thomas Babington Macaulay are works that transcend the times. The second is the political value of literature. Wu Mi summed up the political value of literature by "expressing nationalism, growing patriotism, determining policies, and transferring customs". In traditional Chinese culture, "essays" have never been "written for the sake of essays". As early as the Spring and Autumn Periods, Chinese Confucianism advocated poetic teaching, with "stimulation", "contemplation", "communication" and "criticism" followed by Han Yu's "Essays are woven with humanity" (*Han Changli's Collected Works*). In Song dynasty, Confucianist Zhou Dunyi thought that literary works addressed social realities (*Tongshu-Wenci*). In Wu Mi's (2007) eyes, "literary function" was different from the traditional Chinese "Dao" (laws of nature), which "is like the poetry, for being well-crafted, must correspond to the national situation and people's sentiments of the time, and all parties can echo it" (p. 18), literature should reflect "national situation and people's sentiments" in three aspects.

Firstly, literary works should express their unique national characteristics. Greek Literature is of humanism (harmony; balance; proportion); Roman Literature is of political virtue (the spirit of the man of courteousness, modesty; severe responsibility); Medieval Latin Literature is of unity of faith and reason (consistency); Hebrew Literature is of virtue and will; Sanskrit Philology is of renunciation (self-restraint) and immortality; French literature is of social instinct; German literature is of individualism; British (and American) literature is of practical and utilitarian qualities. (Wu Mi, 1993, Wang Minyuan, trans., pp. 62–63) Leaving aside whether Wu Mi's idea is correct or not, it is true that the literature of various countries has developed a unique literary style and ideological characteristics over time.

Secondly, literary works should reflect the culture of a country. No matter what kind of situation a country is in, everyone should love the history and achievements of their nation, which, in Wu Mi's view, was exactly what the Chinese lacked at that time. "Our people are facing a big crisis: Self-defeating, no faith, ignorant of classics, broken writing (symbols), or no interest in classical culture, lack of communication, and no national anthem" (Wu Mi, 1993, Wang Minyuan, trans., p. 65). He argued that it was the lack of love for one's own national culture that led to many defects in their character such as casual attachment, lack of self-esteem, and self-love and faith. In Wu Mi's view, people had their personalities, and the same case to a country, otherwise, it was difficult to establish a foundation. The national character of a country cannot come from a foreign country but must be rooted in its history.

Thirdly, literature is helpful to improve society. Literary works can not just depict social darkness and human evil, nor can they blindly adopt sarcastic methods in their style of writing. Instead, literary works should guide people upward through literature, face the history of national development, pass on the best traditional culture, and promote social development and progress.

The fourth is the moral value of literature. Wu Mi summed up the moral value of literary works with creating a great harmony in the world and promoting true civilization. "Great Harmony World" does not mean that

everything must be the same, but that "anyone in the world should pursue peace. In other words, a culture of people sharing one another is necessary" (Wu Mi, 1993, Wang Minyuan, trans., p. 67).

A culture of people sharing one another does not mean advocating a kind of ideology and propagating it to the whole country, but bridging different cultures, breaking down the cultural barriers of different civilizations, and making the development of culture for a common goal, which is the integration of different cultures and the construction of a new culture, that is, the fusion of East and West. Wu Mi believed that literary works aimed to spread this "true civilization", which is the ultimate value of literature, transcending the boundaries of countries, regions, and times, and is the ultimate hope for human cultural development. Wu Mi pursued cultural convergence and strongly advocated the traditional culture of the East and the West. It is not for a return to the original classical era, but rather a response to the cultural environment of the time and the shortcomings of cultural development in the late New Culture Movement.

3. The Constructive Foundation of Wu Mi's Literary Philosophy

Wu Mi's literary philosophy has its constructive foundation, which is the integration of "the one and the many" ideas of Babbitt and Moore into the traditional Chinese cultural structure of the "trinity" of heaven, earth, and man. Babbitt and other humanists believe that the human world is between the heavenly world and the physical world, and their ideological characteristics include both the "one" of the heavenly world and the "many" of the physical world. The "One" is a common belief, that is, a basic attribute. For example, in various moral concepts in China, "loyalty and forgiveness" is the basic attribute. With the development of history, a concept will add new connotations, but no matter how they change, their basic attributes will not change; The "many" is the content that keeps increasing or decreasing with the changes of the times, such as "women wrapping their feet", "men and women not touching each other". These are the "many" of morality, which is mainly found in the physical world.

In contrast to the humanists' emphasis on the differences between the heavenly and human cultures, the traditional Chinese cultural structure of the "trinity" of heaven, earth, and man is more concerned with the harmonious coexistence and the pursuit of the "unity of heaven and man." Wu Mi, integrating Eastern and Western thoughts, thought that the three realms of "heaven, earth and man" were as a whole, and that the relationship from the physical realm to the human and then to the heavenly was a progression of inner unity. Man is the center of the universe, and in a dynamic position, with the right to take the initiative.

Therefore, Wu Mi believed that "humanity" was the root of literary research and the foundation of all cultural constructions. He regarded the human world as "the material, intellectual, moral, and spiritual life, private, social, political, economic life, external and inner life, worldly and unworldly life" (Wu Mi, 1993, Wang Minyuan, trans., p. 80). The world in which human beings live together is "universal", the living world of an individual is "particular", the whole is composed of individuals and the "universal" is composed of "particular". The overall human world is the basis of literature construction.

Literary works should reflect humanity, but this does not mean "faithful copying or the accurate reproduction of life" (Wu Mi, 1993, Wang Minyuan, trans., p. 80). Literature is an art for life, what is needed is "creating", then how to create it? According to Wu Mi, a literary creator should have three types of qualities. First, they should have the ability to absorb Eastern and Western cultures and read through ancient and modern literature. Only by studying the ancient and modern cultures of the East and the West can we understand what is true literature and what is suitable for the development of our country. In Wu Mi's (1922) view, the reason why the New Culture Movement was able to surge like a storm and was praised by the majority of young people was that there were very few people in China who could read Western books. Readers couldn't make a judgment although there were many quotations in the articles and names of people, places, book titles, etc., piled up and filled (1922, p. 22).

From the root of "human nature", literary creators must read widely to improve their literary ability, such as a sense of social responsibility, understanding of life, a sense of literary aesthetics, the ability of judgment and other artistic cultivation, rather than copying what others say and following the trend. Second, the writing mirrors the writer. A Literary creator needs to cultivate into a morally noble person. Different literary works have different styles in language, content, and tone. If he is a benevolent person, his works will show a touch of benevolence, and vice versa. Therefore, to write a good work, you first need to cultivate your morality, not just blindly copy what others say, and need to improve from imitating and learning from others. In the traditional Chinese culture, gain trust before success. To have a humble character is a prerequisite for being a writer. Third, the writers must have a "subtle" pen that can reach people's hearts, and reflect from the inside out, humanizing literature and literalizing life, to achieve the purpose of guiding life and showing humanity. What Wu Mi called a "subtle" pen is not to refer to reality, not to lay out, not to narrate, not to describe, not to explain, not to cite, not

to draw, not to analyze, not to measure, not to be shallow, not to be slang, not to be clichéd, not to use legal scientific and mechanical methods to discuss people and narrate things, but to get to the core through a layer (Wu Mi, 1998; Xu Baogeng, ed., p. 219). Only when different works are combined with hardness and softness, and a new unity is obtained in the contradictions, can the effect of reaching people's hearts be achieved.

4. Conclusion

Wu Mi combined Western humanism with traditional Chinese Confucianism to create his literary philosophy. Ancient and modern cultures are in continuous development. The "new" cannot replace the "old". Neither are Eastern and Western cultures opposed to each other, nor is one superior to the other, but each has its strengths and weaknesses, and needs to be integrated with the other. Wu Mi's literary philosophy has not become the mainstream development in modern Chinese history, nor has it prevented the New Culture Movement from replacing the old with the new. However, his literary philosophy is a reference and complementary to the radical literary era in China. It also represents a group of intellectuals with deep classical roots and a love of good traditional culture, who were exploring the future direction of Chinese culture in China's social transformation. At that time, Wu Mi introduced Western humanism into China, finding theoretical justification for the existence of traditional Chinese culture from Western doctrine and laying the foundation for the development of humanist theory in China. Today, Wu Mi's literary philosophy is reviewed, not to comment on the rights and wrongs of "radical" or "conservative" ideas, but rather to provide a reference for understanding the development of Eastern and Western literature and culture.

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