

A Comparative Study of Aristotle's and Confucius' Views on Literature

Xuemeng Zhang

College of Liberal Arts, Jinan University, Guangzhou, Guangdong 510632, China
xmcyp@163.com

ABSTRACT

Aristotle and Confucius were two great ideologists in the Axial Period. Their interpretive theories of literature have, to varying degrees, become the classic works that lay the foundation for the tradition of literary and artistic criticism in the West and East. A comparative study of Aristotle's and Confucius' views will help us to clarify the theoretical core of the development of literature and art in the West and the East. This paper mainly focuses on three core literary viewpoints, production(*poiēsis*), education(*catharsis*), and the relationship between form and content of literature, to explore the similarities and differences between Aristotle's and Confucius's literary views.

Keywords: Aristotle, Confucius, *poiēsis*, *catharsis*, form, content

1. INTRODUCTION

In the book *The Origin and Goal of History*, the German thinker Karl Jaspers called the phenomenon of human cultural breakthroughs that appeared in China, the West, and India at the same time around 500 BC as the *Axial Period*. Aristotle and Confucius were two great ideologists at that time. At the end of the Spring and Autumn Period (5th century BC), Confucius consciously assumed the responsibility of preserving and carrying forward the *rites and music* civilization of the Zhou Dynasty. He opened private schools, recruited disciples, traveled to various countries, and gave lectures, laying the foundation for the inheritance of Chinese education, literature, and political system. The Confucianism tradition, represented by Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, has run through and dominated the development of Chinese literature and art for more than two thousand years. Soon after, Aristotle arrived in Athens in 335 BC and set up a school named "Lyceum", where he walked in the courtyard of the campus, lectured, and discussed with his disciples. He developed and expanded his school and laid the foundation of philosophy, pedagogy, literature, and natural science for western civilization. Their interpretive theories of literature had, to varying degrees, become the classic works that confirm the foundation for the tradition of literary and artistic criticism in the West and East.

Confucianism emphasizes expression, namely "expressing emotion and ambition" as Confucius said, and has developed a literary theory system with "the theory of artistic conception" and "the theory of education" as two pillars. It is often the unity of abstraction and concreteness, generalization and experience, and the coexistence of certainty and ambiguity. The ancient Greek literary theory focuses on representation, or "mimesis" as Plato and Aristotle called it, and has developed a literary theory system centered on "the theory of type". They pay attention to the paradigm and combination rules of literary and artistic works, and "if we turn to the ancient view of the 'artist,' we find that it was much closer to our idea of the craftsman than to modern ideals of independence and originality." (Larry Shiner, 2001, p.22)[1]

Comparing the two people on literary and artistic concepts is of great significance for the understanding of meta-theoretical issues in Eastern and Western comparative aesthetics and the cross-cultural research between the East and the West. The similarity of their theories enables us to grasp the overall law of the development of literature and art more comprehensively. Meanwhile, the differences in their theories have relatively influenced the form and presentation of literary and artistic works under the two cultural backgrounds. This paper mainly focuses on three core literary viewpoints, production(*poiēsis*) and education(*catharsis*), and the relationship between form and content of

literature, to explore the similarities and differences between Aristotle's and Confucius's literary views.

2. COMPARATIVE STUDIES

2.1 Production: *Poiēsis and Carving*

Aristotle divided knowledge or science into three categories, namely theoretical or speculative science (*theoria*), practical science (*praxis*), and production science (*poiēsis*). The task of production science in manufacturing and its purpose is reflected in the creation outside of the producing activity. Poetry belongs to the science of production.

Aristotle largely inherited from Plato the idea that poetry mimics the external world. Through the observations of society, nature, and history, the poet or dramatist, like a craftsman, constantly adjusts and improves plot, rhetoric, and genre. Throughout the 26 chapters in *Poetics*, Aristotle was like an anatomist, diligently analyzing the plot type, key points of characterization, and the components of all diction. These views laid a foundation for the development of later western literary criticism theory, for example, the concept of naturalist literature, Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, etc... . Aristotle seems to be dismantling the parts of drama precisely because he treated poetry and drama as man-made creations, not guided by oracles or Muses, nor channeled by the fountain of inspiration the same way that Plato said, poets are not by the rules of art, but by the scourge of poetry. Because poets work by power rather than skill, they specialize in a particular kind of poetry according to their strengths.

In Confucius' eyes, poetry is also an art through production. It is indispensable for us to make a further explanation of *produce*. The translation of *poiēsis* in Chinese is "zhi". In the *Origin of Chinese Characters*, the earliest work on philology in China in the Eastern Han Dynasty, Xu Shen defined "zhi" as *to trim and reduce*, as well as the tailor's work. The meaning in Chinese is "to break wood with a knife to make it as a useful tool", which, by extension, also refers to the establishment of public order and social norms in terms of the state and clan with characters. As for "zuo", which is often coupled with "zhi" in the translation of *poiēsis*, it is used to describe creative activities performed by people who can convey the heart of heaven and earth. Confucianism endowed it with the norms of established classics and standards for heaven and earth. In his works, Confucius often compared the process of poetry creation with jade and gold sacrificial vessel making. "The relation between human beings and literature is just like the relation between jade and the process of carving it. (Xunzi, *Big Ambition*.)" Confucianism advocates the progress of civilization and enlightenment through carving and trimming.

This point seems to have technical practice in common with Aristotle's understanding of poetry and drama. They all emphasize the artificial intervention, guidance, and dissection of the way of poetry generation, and perfect its pursuit of artistry and value with reasonable skills and means. Their argument also implies that what they make can not only mime nature, heaven, and earth, but also complete the unfinished work of nature and realize a higher level of *tagathon*. Correspondingly, skills are either for practice (*pros tanankaia*) or entertain (*pros Hēdonēn*), or neither practical nor recreational, but for their own purposes, the so-called liberal arts, or humanities.[2]

At the same time, the two production theories also present their own emphases. Aristotle's theory of *poiēsis* is a new elucidation of Plato's theory of imitation. In his opinion, imitation also contains the meaning of creation. Art is not mechanically imitating reality, but creating images with rich connotations. *Poiēsis* also includes generation. There is no contradiction between art as mimesis and art as production. The reason why art is productive is that it reflects human rationality, is a conscious productive activity, and is a creative activity related to beauty. It is closely related to human's ability to create an artifact with the help of technology. In this way, human beings can realize the release of emotions and self-examine in the mirror image of the drama. Through the model of "mimesis - production - transcendence - self-examination", they can achieve a profound cognition of themselves and the situation. Although Confucius also linked "zhi" with people's self-improvement, he focused more on the practical function of "zhi". In the Western Zhou Dynasty, jade and gold vessels were commonly used as rites to maintain the ruling order of the Zhou, to show the authority of the Zhou King. Confucianism emphasized the function of poetry in the rule of rites by taking gold and jade as the metaphor of poetry production. In essence, the exercise and deliberation of this kind of poetry, as well as the cultivation and improvement of the gentleman, are for the construction and maintenance of harmonious, unified, and stable social politics.

2.2 Education: *Catharsis and Gentleman*

The Greek word for "katharsis" is translated into English as "purgation" (or directly adopting its Latin spelling, "catharsis"). Originally an Ancient Greek religious and medical term, since the fifth century BC, "catharsis" has referred to the healing of the human body by diverting unwanted elements to maintain health. It means to wash or wash away.

In the 16th century, Italians often understood Aristotle through Horace, the ancient Roman poet-critic, and observed and elucidated Aristotle's concept of "catharsis" with the "dulce et utile" theory of the former. [2] Giraldis Cinthio (1504-1573), the advocator of modern

Italian Colloquial literature, proposed in chapter 14 of the *Poetics*, “Poet should create the pleasure which comes from pity and fear through mimesis,” (*Poetics*,14.1453b)[3] reveals the true essence of catharsis. It is the pleasure of knowing, of discovering and learning, and this joy is also the essential purpose (phusis-telos), practical function (energeia-chrēsis), and *raison d'être* of the “produce” of “poetry.” (both are “poiēsis” in Greek)

“Tragedy, then, is a mimesis of an action which is elevated, complete, and of magnitude; in language embellished by distinct forms in its sections; employing the mode of enactment, not narrative; and through pity and fear accomplishing the catharsis of such emotions.” (*Poetics*,6.1449b)[3]

Aristotle did not regard the art of rendering and influencing emotions created by poetry as the erosion of rationality. He did not exclude the pleasure people get in epic and drama and the joy of knowing themselves, which is quite different from Plato’s value judgment. Whether by evoking fear or luring the reader into ecstasy, poetry, according to Aristotle, can greatly arouse the reader’s emotions, and through this release can achieve spiritual purification and transformation. Aristotle focused on the power of poetry behind its appeal to the good and to achieve self-transcendence.

Therefore, “catharsis” is intended to reduce to a proper mixture and contribute to a virtuous habit. In this regard, the whole work of tragedy is to teach people to fear the death of the spiritual life and to despise the death of the physical life, to witness in themselves the force of justice through the removal of fear and pity, from which comes the so-called “pleasure of tragedy”, which Aristotle saw as the essential purpose of tragedy as an imitation of art.

Confucius also noticed the role of poetry in people’s education and enlightenment. In *the Book of Rites*, Confucius also explained the role of literature in “purifying” and “educating” the human mind. “Entering a country, one can learn about its civilizing of its citizens; If the people are gentle and kind, it must be the result of the poem.” Confucius attributed one of the cultivation sources of social morality and crowd quality to the subtle guidance of poetry, and he paid attention to the external function of poetry in changing customs. He attached importance to the aesthetic, cognitive, and educational functions of literature, which led to the opening of poetry text space, expanded to society and politics, and produced practical influence. Thus it can be seen that Chinese traditional literature and art as early as the Zhou Dynasty laid the characteristics of attaching importance to moral perfection, social function, and educational function.

Similar to Aristotle, Confucius did not reject the property of entertainment in poetry. He believed that poetry can lead people to the path of learning and self-improvement through its calling and pleasure. In

Confucius’ eyes, poetry, etiquette, and music, along with the accompanying institutions and rituals, constituted a trinity system for cultivating a *sane gentleman*.

“The Master said, get your start with the *Odes*; acquire a firm standing through ritual; complete the process with music.” (*The Analects*, chap.8, 8)[4]

Noticeably, Confucius used the term “to express anger” when he elucidated the function of poetry, which overlapped with Aristotle’s theory of “catharsis”.

“The Master said, Young people, why do none of you study the *Odes*? The *Odes* train you in analogy, allow you to observe customs, teach you to be sociable, teach you to express anger.” (*The Analects*, chap.27, 9)[4]

Although the cultural context and political background of “catharsis” and “poetry’s education” are different, both Aristotle and Confucius noticed the external perspective of literature, which may have new enlightenment for us to understand the development conditions of literature. The biggest difference is that although poetry was involved in the cultivation of personality and political life, ancient Greeks made full use of poetry in public speeches to make their views more appealing, and then actively participated in elections and politics, which was a *horizontal* communication mode. “Apart from the many social functions of the Greek arts, a second reason there was little of the modern ‘aesthetic’ attitude is that most Greeks and Romans admired sculptures or poetic recitals as they would have admired well-made political speeches.” (Larry Shiner, 2001, p.25)[1]

By contrast, in Confucianism, poetry was more like a communication medium between the emperor and the people. In *The Analects*, Confucius said: A man may be able to recite all three hundred odes, if he being an official but unable to reach the will of the people through poetry; if being assigned as an envoy to some neighboring state but he can’t give his answers unassisted, then no matter how many odes he might know, what good is he? As we can see, people sent folk poetry to the emperor to make the emperor observe and reflect on their ruling. The emperor propagated poems in line with social etiquette to civilize the people, which was a *vertical* way of dissemination. Aristotle’s catharsis focused more on personal perfection and purification, while Confucius’ “poetry’s education” emphasized the promotion and guidance of poetry for social morality, ruling order, and talent within the system.

2.3 Form and Content:

Scholars have always paid attention to the relationship between the external form and internal content of literature. According to Ingarden, every literary work is composed of four heterogeneous strata. The most expressive level covers literary expression

elements such as word sounds and phonetic formations; on top of this, it constitutes meaning units of all kinds and schematized aspects; in addition to the musicality, and meaning of the text, it also involves represented entities, that is, where all the objects projected by the description are located. [5]From the first layer to the fourth layer, literary work is like a cake with distinct layers and a fusion of taste. It may help us understand how literature constructs the relationship between its own form and the objective content it describes.

In the Western literary tradition, the emphasis on rhetoric constitutes the basic premise of the pursuit of the beauty of literary form. From a stylistic point of view, ancient Greek literature is known for its epics and dramas. The establishment of a stylistic is manifested in the finalization of the format, which is embodied in syllables, rhymes, sentence patterns, layout, and other formal elements. In *Poetics*, Aristotle emphasized the sense of tone and rhythm. These two feelings are the nature and aptitude of the poet, because they are directly expressed as the syllables and rhymes of the poetry. The choice of metric depends on the need of imitation, and the essence is a view that content and purpose determine form.

“Excellence of diction means clarity and avoidance of banality. Now, clearest is the diction that uses standard terms, but this is banal: the poetry of Cleophon and Sthenelus is the diction that uses exotic language (by “exotic” I mean loan words, metaphors, lengthening, and all divergence from the standard). But if one composes entirely in this vein, the result will be either a riddle or barbarism—a riddle, if metaphors predominate; barbarism, if loan words.”(*Poetics*,22. XXII)[3]

Although Aristotle didn’t take writers’ thoughts as “content” and use “clarity” instead, we could still tell that he treat the essence of thoughts as meanings that can be easily grasped. Aristotle believed that in the part of the work that has nothing to do with expressing thought, writers can use literary talent to make up for its gentle relaxation. When it comes to the part of focusing on expressing thought, writers should try to reduce the use of gorgeous language as much as possible to avoid distracting speech. From the perspective of formal beauty, literary works should show diversity and variability as much as possible within a unified whole, with appropriate beautification in the language where it is irrelevant, and removing the interference of red tape in the key ideology. The overall planning of this technique lies in the subjective initiative of the creative subject (the poet).

Aristotle emphasized the well-placed balance and unification between form and content, which is similar to the idea of Confucian. In Confucianism, Confucius first discussed the relationship between content and form of literature. “The Master said, Where solid qualities outweigh refinement, you have rusticity. Where refinement outweighs solid qualities, you have the clerky style. Refinement and solid qualities beautifully

balanced—then you have the gentleman.”(*The Analects*, chap.6, 18)[4]Here, “refinement and solid qualities beautifully balanced”, from the perspective of literary form and content, “refinement” refers to form, that is, flashy rhetoric and skills; and “solid qualities” refer to content, as well as the author’s thoughts and objective truths. There must be a perfect balance between the two.

Confucius believed that form and content are inseparable and indispensable, and complementary to each other. Emphasizing the form and neglecting the content will cause literature to be incomprehensible, and thus become empty and flashy, as Aristotle put it, “passages of loan words constitute barbarism.”(*Poetics*,22. XXII)[3] ; emphasizing the content and neglecting the form will make the article seem crude and naive. In *Chapter 12, Zigong*, a student of Confucian said that, refinement is equal in worth to solid qualities, and solid qualities to refinement. “Strip the hide of a tiger or a panther of its [patterned fur], and it is no different from that of a dog or a goat.” This proposition still has positive guiding significance for contemporary Chinese literary creation and criticism. Confucius extended the relationship between content and form by discussing the principles of human cultivation, which is regarded as the earliest discussion on the content and form of literature and art.[6]

It should be noted that Aristotle and Confucius had different backgrounds in literary criticism. Comparing the two literary development stages, the developed Greek epic system provided Aristotle with more materials for observation. Scholars such as Hippias, Demokritos, Stsimbrotos of Thasos, etc. had made a lot of achievements in poetry criticism. In contrast, in the context of Confucius’s era, *The Book of Songs* had just emerged from folk songs and come into the field of literature. Literature was still in ambiguous interaction with politics, ballads, and sacrificial activities. Therefore, what Aristotle emphasized is the presentation of the artistic effect of the text, and more to treat the works independently. Confucius emphasized the connection between being a person and constructing an essay, and practicing the unity of content and form of the article is more of a guide to the cultivation of a perfect personality.

3. CONCLUSION

In summary, we can find the similarities in comparative aesthetics between Aristotle and Confucius. From the perspective of literary production, both Aristotle and Confucius agreed that literature and art need to be produced through certain techniques. At the same time, the production process of literary and artistic production can also help people achieve self-improvement and self-transcendence. From the perspective of the educational effect of literature and art, both believed that literature and art can help readers vent their emotions and purify their hearts, and paid attention

to the effect of literary works in stimulating the emotions of readers and audiences. The difference is that Aristotle paid more attention to the role of literature and art in personal growth, while Confucius emphasized the positive role of literature and poetry in promoting political order and social atmosphere. Regarding the relationship between the form and content of literature, Aristotle and Confucius believed that the two should be well-balanced and unified. Meanwhile, Aristotle emphasized is the presentation of the artistic effect of the text, and more to treat the works independently. Confucius emphasized the connection between being a person and constructing an essay, and practicing the unity of content and form of the article is more of a guide to the cultivation of a perfect personality.

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