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The Mirror of the Other and the Reconstruction of the Self— With Special Reference to *The Study on the Image of Confucius in the French-Speaking World*

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Abstract: *The Study on the Image of Confucius in the French-Speaking World* stands out as the first academic monograph in China to systematically investigate the historical evolution of Confucius’s image within the French-speaking world. Employing the theoretical framework of comparative literary imagology and spanning a historical depth of over four centuries, the book conducts a comprehensive review of French-language literature from 1688 to the present. It delineates the transformation of Confucius’s image from a “philosopher” to an “Enlightenment idol” and subsequently to a “secular sage.” This paper argues that the book’s primary contribution lies in its fundamental shift in research perspective: rather than inquiring into the “authenticity” of Confucius in the French-speaking context, it explores how this “Other” image reflects the cultural psychology and power dynamics of the French-speaking world itself. Through a methodological commitment to a “gazer-centric” approach, it not only fills a significant gap in the study of Confucius’s overseas image within the French-speaking sphere but also offers profound theoretical reflections on China’s strategy of cultural “going global.”

Keywords: *The Study on the Image of Confucius in the French-Speaking World*; comparative literary imagology; French-speaking World; images of Confucius

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标题: 他者的镜像与自我的重构——以《法语世界的孔子形象研究》为中心

摘要: 《法语世界的孔子形象研究》是国内首部系统考察法语世界孔子形象流变的学术专著。该书以比较文学形象学为理论框架，跨越四个多世纪的历史纵深，通过对 1688 年至今法语文献的全面梳理，呈现了孔子从“哲学家”到“启蒙偶像”再到“世俗智者”的形象嬗变。该著的最大贡献在于实现了研究视角的根本转换：不再追问法语世界的孔子是否“真实”，而是探究这一“他者”形象如何折射法语世界自身的文化心理与权力诉求。通过“注视者中心论”的方法论自觉，该著不仅填补了孔子海外形象研究的法语世界空白，更对中国文化“走出去”战略提供了深刻的学理反思。

关键词: 《法语世界的孔子形象研究》；比较文学形象学；法语世界；孔子形象

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Introduction

In the current era, where globalization and “cultural confidence” have become keywords, the overseas dissemination of Chinese culture has increasingly become a focal point of academic attention. As the chief ambassador of Chinese culture, Confucius’s image abroad has naturally attracted significant scholarly interest. However, as pointed out in the introduction, existing research suffers from four notable limitations: 1) Fragmented Research Objects: Previous studies have been scattered and lack systematic coherence; 2) Limited Output: Academic achievements are predominantly confined to journal articles, lacking comprehensive monographs; 3) Outdated Sources: Research relies on singular and somewhat outdated source materials; 4) Rigid Methodologies: Approaches are largely confined to translation studies or literary criticism, with a scarcity of interdisciplinary perspectives. (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 4)

It is precise to enrich this academic field that *The Study on the Image of Confucius in the French-Speaking World* demonstrates its unique scholarly intent. By selecting the French-speaking world as its object of study, the work acknowledges not only France’s status as the center of European Sinology and the cradle of the Enlightenment, but also the fact that French, as an official language of the UN and EU, exerts cultural influence across Europe, Canada, Africa, and beyond. Consequently, examining the reception of Confucius in the French-speaking world is far from a mere regional case study; rather, it addresses the grand proposition of the core dialogue between Chinese and Western civilizations.

Cheng Lei (2021) completed her first academic monograph, *East to West: Translations and researches on Lun Yu in the French-speaking world*. Compared to her first monograph, it is quite clear that this monograph outshines her debut on multiple levels. On a deeper level, the theoretical ambition of this work lies in using the “Confucius in a foreign land” as a mirror to reflect on the mechanisms of transformation and the logic of misreading inherent in the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese culture. The book explicitly points out that the image of Confucius in the French-speaking world is “not a reproduction of his authentic image in his native land, but a product resulting from a mixture of subjectivity and objectivity, emotion and thought” (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 7). This implies that the study’s objective is not to distinguish between a “true” and a “false” Confucius, but to unveil the psychology of the “gazer” behind the construction of this image. This inevitably raises several questions: Why did the French-speaking world require different versions of Confucius at different times? How did such needs shape his image? Ultimately, all of this points to a question of greater contemporary relevance: How should China narrate its own story?

Cai Hecun (2025, p. 25) pointed out, “... re-examining the cross-border dissemination and localized transformation of ... culture in ... not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the pathways and mechanisms of cultural transmission but also offers valuable insights for contemporary cultural exchange and mutual learning among civilizations.” It is also true with the case of images of Confucius in the French-speaking world.

1. A Methodological Breakthrough: The Chinese Practice of Imagology in Comparative Literature

The value of academic research depends not only on the novelty of the facts it reveals, but more importantly, on the precision of its questioning and analytical tools. *The Study on the Image of Confucius in the French-Speaking World* possesses a certain paradigmatic significance, largely due to the author’s clear and conscious methodological awareness. Rather than simply treating Confucius in the French-speaking world as an objective object to be described, the work asks from the outset: What kind of “gaze” should we use to look at this this image? This inquiry leads directly to the theoretical resources of Imagology in comparative literature.

However, the introduction of theory is by no means a mechanical application. The significance of this work lies in its migration of Imagology from the study of exotic images within Europe to the study of the reception of Chinese thought in Western contexts, thereby testing and developing the theoretical propositions of scholars like Daniel-Henri Pageaux and Jean-Marc Moura within the practice of cross-cultural dialogue. It is precisely this dimension of Chinese practice that endows the methodological discussion with a special tension. It must not only respond to the limits of the universality of Western theory but also explain why Confucius, as a specific “Other,” presents such a complex visage in the French-speaking world. With this dual awareness, we can delve into the first core proposition of the book’s methodology: What kind of epistemological revolution has Imagology actually achieved?

1.1 From “Seeking Truth” to “Seeking Difference”: The Epistemological Revolution of Imagology

The most fundamental methodological contribution of this work lies in its conscious application and development of the theoretical paradigm of Imagology in comparative literature. In the first chapter, the author

meticulously reviews the theoretical legacy of scholars such as Daniel-Henri Pageaux and Jean-Marc Moura, pointing out that the core proposition of Imagology is that “the image is an expression of the gap between two types of cultural realities”. (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 12)

This theoretical stance entails an epistemological subversion. Traditional research often presupposes an “authentic” Confucius, then measures the degree of deviation of the foreign image from this original, ultimately arriving at judgments of misreading or distortion. This work, however, thoroughly bids farewell to this essentialist thinking. It posits that “the study of foreign images is a study of collective representations, a study of the collective cultural psychology of a foreign society.” (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 7) In other words, the image of Confucius in the French-speaking world is essentially a mirror. What it reflects is not the countenance of Confucius himself, but rather the cultural psychology, historical situation, and power claims of the French-speaking world itself.

The significance of this methodological shift cannot be overstated. It liberates researchers from the anxiety of seeking truth, allowing them to focus on the more explanatory question of “why such an imagination exists.” For instance, when confronted with an anachronistic image in an 18th-century print—where Confucius is depicted wearing European robes and standing before a Western-style library—traditional research might condemn it as inaccurate. This work, however, interprets it as a typical case of cultural collage. This was not ignorance, but rather a visual representation of Europe’s imagination of a “Rational China” at that time.

1.2 The “Gazer”-Centric Theory: From Confucius as the Object of Study to the French-speaking World as the Subject of Inquiry

Echoing the aforementioned epistemological shift, this work proposes a research strategy of “Gazer-Centricity”. It argues that image studies should “focus on the subject, that is, the gazer,” rather than merely paying attention to the being gazed “other”. (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 13) This implies that while the ostensible object of study in the book is Confucius, the actual subject is the French-speaking world, specifically, the missionaries, Enlightenment thinkers, academic Sinologists, and the general readership within it, as well as the historical contexts in which these groups were situated.

This methodological awareness manifests in the specific analysis as a dual inquiry: First, what kind of Confucius did the French-speaking world need at different times? Second, how did this need shape the image of Confucius? Taking the 18th century as an example, the book brilliantly reveals the diametrically opposed attitudes of Voltaire and Montesquieu towards Confucius. Voltaire needed a moral philosopher as a weapon to attack the Church (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 62), whereas Montesquieu needed an accomplice to despotism as the other to demonstrate Western superiority. (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 76) The fact that Confucius appeared in two diametrically opposed images during the same period was not because Voltaire and Montesquieu differed in their depth of knowledge about China, but because their political agendas were different.

This “Gazer-centric” analytical approach enables the book to transcend the writing of a mere history of reception, elevating it to a form of profound cultural diagnosis. The evolution of the Confucius image depicted in this work is, in essence, a spiritual history of the French-speaking world from the 17th century to the present encompassing its political theology, Enlightenment rationality, colonial mentality, post-war reflection, and even the anxieties of globalization.

1.3 The Combination of the External and the Internal: The Practice of Contextualized Reading

The methodological feature of this work is also reflected in the organic integration of “external textual study” and “internal textual study”. (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 7) The book focuses not only on the linguistic choices, annotation selections, and prefaces/postscripts of the translations themselves, but also interprets these textual details within a broad historical context.

Taking the 1687 publication of Philippe Couplet’s *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* as an example, the book not only analyzes the translation strategies of the Latin text but also draws attention to the dedication addressed to Louis XIV. In this dedication, Couplet depicts Confucius as an Eastern sage coming to “kowtow” at the feet of Louis XIV, praising the King as the embodiment of the “enlightened monarch” envisioned in Confucian ideals. The introduction of the external context reveals a crucial fact: the publication of this Confucian classic was not merely an act of cultural transmission, but also one of political flattery. Having encountered resistance from the Roman Curia, Couplet was well aware of the importance of Louis XIV’s patronage; therefore, he had to resort to flattering language in exchange for publication permission. This kind of contextualized reading provides us with a deeper understanding of the complexity surrounding the early Western translation of Chinese classics.

Similarly, in analyzing the 19th-century translations of the *Four Books* by Guillaume Pauthier and Séraphin Couvreur respectively, the book links the characteristics of the translations to the translators’ historical situations. Living in the political turmoil of France’s “post-Revolutionary era”, Guillaume Pauthier paid particular attention to the “moral sense” and political philosophy within the Confucian classics; Couvreur, as a Jesuit, continued the exegetical tradition of early missionaries, emphasizing the faithful representation of Zhu Xi’s commentaries. This combined internal and external interpretation avoids reducing translation to the technical work of language transfer, instead regarding it as a complex field of cultural dialogue.

2. A Diachronic Narrative: The Four Transformations of the Image of Confucius

Having completed the theoretical construction at the methodological level, the book naturally shifts its focus from “how to look” to “what has been seen”. It divides this long history of reception into five stages: the formative period dominated by missionaries in the 16th-17th centuries; the golden age of the Enlightenment thinkers in the 18th century; the turning point under the shadow of Euro-centrism in the 19th century; the disenchantment characterized by popularization and secularization in the 20th century; and the symbiotic period in the era of media diversity in the 21st century (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, pp. 5-7). Each transformation of the image represents not only an adjustment in the self-perception of the French-speaking world but also a reconfiguration of Sino-Western power relations.

2.1 The Formative Period: Confucius as the Missionaries’ “Philosopher” (16th-17th Centuries)

The book traces the origin of the image of Confucius in the French-speaking world back to the Jesuit missionaries of the late 16th century. Matteo Ricci’s strategy of “cultural accommodation” set the fundamental tone for the early image of Confucius. Confucius was regarded as a “philosopher” rather than “god”, and Confucianism was viewed as a form of “natural theology” rather than a religious faith (Cheng Lei et al, 2024,

p. 58). This judgment had far-reaching implications: it not only left room for the spread of Christianity in China (the Chinese had morality but lacked revelation), but also earned Confucius a cultural status in Europe “comparable to that of Socrates”.

However, the book does not stop at this conventional narrative. Through a detailed analysis of the production process of Philippe Couplet’s *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, it reveals the “collective collaboration” model and the phenomenon of “cultural pasting” in early translations. Particularly noteworthy is the book’s attention to the Chinese collaborator, Shen Fo-tsung. As one of the earliest Chinese students to travel to Europe, Shen participated in the proofreading of the Latin translation of the Four Books and demonstrated Chinese culture at the French court (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, pp. 37-38, 96-97). The book points out that Shen’s presence proves that the Chinese were not merely the observed, but also active participants. This insight breaks the unidirectional narrative of “the West gazing at the East”, offering a more balanced perspective for the study of cross-cultural exchange.

2.2 The Golden Age: Confucius as “Utopia” and “Ideology” for the Enlightenment Thinkers (18th Century)

The 18th century was the “Golden Age” of the image of Confucius in the French-speaking world, and it is also the most prominently featured part of the book. Against the historical backdrop of the “Chinese Rites Controversy”, and using the theoretical framework of “utopianization” and “ideologization”, the book meticulously outlines the dual variation of the image of Confucius in the writings of the Enlightenment thinkers.

On the one hand, Voltaire molded Confucius into a paradigm of the “rational man”. The book employs the “admiration model” from reception aesthetics to analyze Voltaire’s reception of Confucius. In Confucius, Voltaire saw the humanist ideals he had pursued all his life: the positive principle of “establishing others while establishing oneself, and helping others succeed while seeking one’s own success”, as well as the social norms of mutual assistance and love. More importantly, Voltaire was not a passive recipient; rather, through repetitive discourse, he “stereotyped” the image of Confucius, transforming it into a concise cultural symbol used to criticize the obscurantism and despotism of the French Church. (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, pp. 69-71)

On the other hand, thinkers like Montesquieu and Rousseau constructed a diametrically opposite image of Confucius. In *The Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu characterized China as a “despotic state”, arguing that Confucian rites and the despotic system “conspired” together to produce obedient and ignorant subjects (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 76). Rousseau further reinforced this judgment in *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, contending that scholars educated in the Confucian way were merely hollow sophists who could not prevent China’s fate of being conquered by foreigners (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 77). The book accurately points out that the divergence between these two voices did not stem from the depth of their understanding of China, but from their differing political agendas. Voltaire needed a “utopia” as a reference to criticize reality, while Montesquieu needed a “negative example” to demonstrate the superiority of Western liberal institutions.

This analysis reveals a core insight of imagology: the image of the Other is always a self-projection of the imagining subject (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, pp. 58-59). The fate of Confucius in 18th-century France was,

in essence, a “dialogue among the French”, with China serving merely as an appropriated symbol (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 74).

2.3 The Turning Point: Confucius as “Stagnant” in the Colonial Context (19th Century)

The 19th century marked the nadir of the image of Confucius in Europe, and it is also a section of the book rich in theoretical tension. The book situates this transformation within a dual context: first, the establishment of the European “philosophy of progress”, and second, the reversal of power relations brought about by colonial expansion.

On the theoretical level, in 1750 Jacques Turgot’s thesis on the “continuous progress of the human mind” and in 1793 Condorcet’s *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* jointly constructed a system of evaluation centered on “reason”, “progress”, and “liberty”. Within this framework, China was perceived as a “stagnant civilization”—possessing ancient history, yet lacking the driving force for development. Hegel’s assertion that China has no history became the classic expression of the European view of China in the 19th century.

On the practical level, the Opium Wars (1839-1842) and the Boxer Rebellion (1900-1901) fundamentally altered the balance of power between China and the West. China was transformed from a “respectable ancient civilization” into a “readily available prey”. (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 105) This reversal of power relations profoundly influenced the construction of the image of Confucius: he was no longer a mentor, but a culprit responsible for China’s stagnation.

However, the book does not simply characterize the study of Confucius in the 19th century as “negative”. Through a detailed analysis of two translations of the *Four Books* by Pauthier and Couvreur respectively, it points out that despite the oppressive atmosphere of the times, the French Sinological tradition maintained a relatively objective academic stance. In particular, Couvreur’s Latin-French bilingual edition, with its rigorous scholarly annotation and faithful presentation of Zhu Xi’s interpretations, has become a classic spanning centuries — continuing to be reprinted well into the 21st century. This observation reveals the difference between French and American Sinology: while the latter may be more influenced by ideology, the former, due to its profound philological tradition, often managed to maintain a degree of academic autonomy amidst the colonial wave.

2.4 Secularization and Popularization: The “Disenchanted” Confucius of the 20th Century

The 20th century was a crucial period in which the image of Confucius descended from the “altar” to the “human world”. The book summarizes this transformation in terms of two dimensions: “secularization” and “popularization”.

“Secularization” is reflected in a shift in perspective: Confucius is no longer a “sage” with a divine halo or a “sinner”, but is restored to being a “human”. This trend reached its peak in Confucius, published by René Étiemble in 1956. The book’s case study of Étiemble is one of its highlights. Étiemble, a fighter against “Eurocentrism”, translated the *Analects* as *Les Entretiens familiers* (Familiar Conversations), deliberately highlighting the egalitarian dialogue between Confucius and his disciples. By citing passages such as “The Master visited Nanzi, and Zilu was displeased”, he presented a vivid image of Confucius swearing oaths and

anxiously defending himself, thoroughly stripping away the divine halo. As Étienne wrote in the book, he speaks like a wise man, and that is why I love him. — Confucius had transformed from a “sage” into an “approachable wise man”. (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 170)

“Popularization” is reflected in the expansion of the audience: Confucius was no longer just the subject of research for academic Sinologists and thinkers, but became a spiritual resource for ordinary French readers. The book statistics show that dozens of Confucius-related works were published in the French-speaking world in the 20th century, and found that a large number of them were “popular readings” — short in length, written in accessible language, and illustrated, aiming to introduce “Eastern wisdom” to the general public. This phenomenon marks Confucius’s true entry into the daily cultural life of the French-speaking world. (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, pp. 137-143)

2.5 Pluralistic Coexistence in the 21st Century

Since the 21st century, the dissemination of the image of Confucius in the French-speaking world has presented a new pattern of “pluralistic coexistence”. On the one hand, traditional academic research continues to deepen: scholars such as Rémi Mathieu, Charles Le Blanc, François Jullien, and Jean Levi have produced a number of high-quality monographs and translations from different disciplinary perspectives such as philosophy, history, and linguistics. On the other, the forms of mass communication have become increasingly diverse: the intervention of new media such as comics, picture books, audiobooks, and documentaries has enabled the image of Confucius to break through the boundaries of printed books and reach a wider audience.

The book pays special attention to cases such as the French edition of Tsai Chih-chung’s comic *Les Entretiens de Confucius* and the broadcast of the 2016 documentary *Confucius* on the French TV channel ARTE. These cases indicate that Confucius has become an “adaptable” cultural resource—creators can recreate the image of Confucius according to the characteristics of different media and the needs of the audience.

However, the book also points out with keen critical awareness that there are risks of “misrepresentation” and “hollowing out” in pluralistic dissemination. The book cites a ridiculous example: the French translation of *Confucius: Les Analectes* published by Françoise Fortoul in 2016 has a cover printed with a Taoist Taiji Yin-Yang pattern. (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 187) The appearance of this Taoist symbol on a Confucian classic exposes the publisher’s confusion between the two Chinese schools of thought. When the librarian of the National Library of France received this book, he praised it as “exquisite”, completely unaware that the cover design conveyed wrong information. (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 187) This detail is highly symbolic: as the image of Confucius becomes more and more popular in the French-speaking world, its cultural connotation also faces the risk of being diluted or even distorted.

3. Theoretical Tension and Academic Contribution

The value of this book lies precisely in its fusion of theoretical tension and historical mastery—it is neither an empty theoretical deduction nor a trivial accumulation of materials, but establishes a sustained dialogue

between rich French literature and keen theoretical insight. The academic contributions generated by this dialogue are multidimensional: the most explicit is the large-scale excavation and systematic organization of historical materials on Confucian studies in the French-speaking world; a deeper level is the enhancement of explanatory power brought about by the methodological stance of “gazer-centric theory”; and the most theoretically tense is the complex balance it maintains between the critique of Euro-centrism and the recognition of the possibility of cross-cultural dialogue.

3.1 Filling Academic Gaps and Excavating Historical Materials

The most intuitive contribution of this book lies in filling an academic gap. As the book states in its introduction, there is currently no monograph in China that systematically studies the image of Confucius in the French-speaking world. The book extends the time span of the research from the 17th century to the 21st century, covering multiple countries and regions in the French-speaking world (France, Belgium, Switzerland, Quebec in Canada), and constructs a complete knowledge landscape.

Even more commendable is the richness and primary nature of the historical materials. The book uses a large number of French original documents, including obscure works such as Jean de La Bruine’s *La Morale de Confucius, philosophe de la Chine*, and François Bernier’s *Confucius ou la science des princes*, etc. These documents are rarely consulted in many French libraries, and the excavation work of this book has important philological value.

3.2 The Methodological Breakthrough: the “Gazer-Centric Theory”

As mentioned above, the most core theoretical contribution of this book is the realization of the research perspective shift from the “being gazed” to the “gazer”. This shift not only avoids the trap of “seeking truth”, but also opens up an academic possibility of “reflecting on oneself”. The image of Confucius is a reflective focus of how the French-speaking world views Chinese culture, and the ultimate goal of studying the image of Confucius is to reflect on the strategy of Chinese culture going to the French-speaking world.

This means that studying the image of Confucius in the French-speaking world ultimately requires answering the contemporary proposition of “how we should tell our own story”. When Voltaire shaped Confucius as a “spokesperson for reason”, we find that it was actually his own mirror image; when Montesquieu depicted Confucius as an “accomplice of despotism”, that was also a projection of his own fears. Understanding this mechanism helps us maintain clarity in external cultural communication — the Other is always interpreting us for their own purposes, we cannot control this interpretation, but we can understand its logic, and on this basis find a more effective way of dialogue.

3.3 The Dual Transcendence of “Euro-centrism”

The research stance of this book has a distinct touch of anti-Eurocentrism, but its way of transcendence is dialectical. On the one hand, the book fully acknowledges that the construction of Confucius in the French-speaking world is essentially a product of “ethnocentrism” — the way of opposing the self and the other to achieve the purpose of naturalizing the other. On the other hand, the book refuses to simply condemn Western sinology as a whole as “Orientalism”, but meticulously distinguishes the positions and contributions of different periods and scholars. Case studies such as Couvreur’s rigorous translation studies, Etienne’s anti-

colonial stance, and Anne Cheng's cultural intermediary identity show that there is always a possibility of transcending power discourse in cross-cultural dialogue.

This attitude of both being critical and analytic enables the book to transcend the simple narrative of Sino-Western opposition and present a more complex picture of civilization interaction.

4. Discussion and Scope for Expansion

As a pioneering work, while the book has achieved significant success, it also leaves some room for further discussion.

4.1 The Limits of "Variation": Is There a "Real" Sinological Tradition?

The book emphasizes that the core of imagology is "variation", and this theoretical stance is extremely effective in revealing the mechanism of cultural construction. But it also needs to be asked: Is the reception of Confucius in the French-speaking world merely a product of "imagination"? Is there a "scientific sinology" tradition that is committed to presenting Chinese thought as objectively as possible?

Couvreur's translation of the *Four Books*, whose French name is *Les Quatre Livres*, is a case worthy of in-depth study. The book points out that "it strictly adheres to the Zhu Xi school's annotations and exegesis endorsed by the Chinese officialdom at that time" (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 128), and this judgment implies that Couvreur's work is different from the "imagined" image of Confucius. But the question is: Zhu Xi's interpretation itself is a "construction", so is Couvreur's "faithful translation" just another "construction"? Is it possible to reach the "original" meaning? These questions touch on the core dilemma of hermeneutics, but the book seems not to have fully developed them.

Perhaps the concept of "double othering" can be introduced to deepen the discussion. The image of Confucius in the French-speaking world is certainly a variation of Chinese Kongzi, but Chinese Kongzi itself is also a product constructed by commentators of all ages. When we measure the overseas image by the Chinese local image, this "standard" self is also fluid and constructed. The deepening of this problem consciousness may lead to more subversive conclusions.

4.2 The Risk of "Hollowing Out" in Mass Communication

Chapter Six of the book affirms the diversified dissemination of the image of Confucius in the 21st century, but also keenly points out the problem of "miscommunication". (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, pp. 186-187) This judgment can be further deepened into such a question: When Confucius becomes a "cultural symbol" that is widely disseminated, does its connotation face the risk of being diluted or even hollowed out?

Taking Tsai Chih-chung's comic *Les Entretiens de Confucius* as an example, the comic form naturally has a tendency towards simplification, exaggeration, and entertainment. In order to adapt to the reading habits of comic readers, complex philosophical thoughts must be transformed into simple life aphorisms. This process certainly expands the scope of dissemination, but it may also lead to Confucius' thoughts being simplified into "chicken soup for the soul". What is more worrying is that when readers are satisfied with the "Confucian wisdom" in the comic version, will they still go to read the original text of the *Analects*?

This dilemma is not an isolated case, but a common problem faced by all "popularization" of classics. This book reveals this phenomenon, but does not conduct an in-depth evaluation of its cultural consequences. This may be an area where follow-up research can focus.

4.3 The Absence of Comparative Perspectives

The book focuses on the French-speaking world, which is both its advantage (depth) and its limitation (breadth). Readers will naturally have a desire for comparison: What are the similarities and differences between the reception of Confucius in the French-speaking world and that in the English-speaking and German-speaking worlds? Why does the French-speaking world focus more on “morality” and “politics”, while the English-speaking world focuses more on “religion” and “pragmatism”? What are the differences between Voltaire’s Confucius and Emerson’s Confucius? These questions are not developed in the book.

Introducing a comparative perspective may lead to more interesting discoveries. For example, the book mentions Leibniz’s admiration for Confucius, but Leibniz wrote in German, and his influence was mainly limited to the German-speaking world. The reception of Leibniz in the French-speaking world is itself a question worthy of exploration: How did it play an intermediary role in the relationship between German philosophy and the French Enlightenment? Similarly, Charles Le Blanc, analyzed in the book, is a Canadian French-speaking scholar whose research was deeply influenced by American sinology. This “cross-linguistic” flow of knowledge reveals that the French-speaking world is not a closed system, but a node in the global knowledge network.

Conclusion

The significance of *The Study on the Image of Confucius in the French-Speaking World* goes far beyond the sorting out of a history of cross-cultural reception. Through the mirror of the “Other”, it profoundly reflects on the construction process of the “Self”—whether it is the “Self” of the French-speaking world or the “Self” that Chinese culture is constructing.

For the French-speaking world, the four-hundred-year evolution of the image of Confucius serves as a mirror to its spiritual history: from religious expansion to Enlightenment rationality, and from colonial mentality to post-war reflection, the French of every era have seen in Confucius what they wanted to see. For contemporary China, this research is also a mirror. It reminds us that cultural communication is not a one-way “export”, but a complex “dialogue”. We cannot expect the Other to accept “authentic” Chinese culture intact, because every act of reception is an act of “re-creation”. Understanding the mechanism of this “re-creation” is essential both to avoid blind optimism (thinking that “telling China’s stories well” will make the world understand us) and to avoid blind pessimism (attributing all misreadings to “distortion”).

On a deeper level, this research reminds us to reflect on a more fundamental question: Is our own image of Confucius merely a construction of a certain historical context? When we shape Confucius into a “spiritual symbol of the Chinese nation” in the name of “cultural confidence”, does this image also serve current political needs? This is not a relativistic denial, but a reminder for us to maintain necessary reflective self-awareness.

As the book states in its conclusion: “We should stand on the position of Chinese scholarship itself and establish a critical Sinology”. (Cheng Lei et al, 2024, p. 218) This “critical” consciousness means understanding both how the Other imagines us and how we imagine ourselves. Only in this way can we neither lose ourselves nor become complacent in the tide of mutual learning among civilizations.

The Study on the Image of Confucius in the French-Speaking World is precisely such a masterpiece that combines academic depth with practical concern. It not only provides important academic resources for the fields of comparative literature, overseas Sinology, and cross-cultural studies in China, but also offers profound theoretical reflection for the strategy of Chinese culture “going global”. In this sense, it is not only a book about the “Other”, but more importantly, a book about the “Self”—it illuminates others and also reflects upon itself.

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