

William Temple's Views on Confucianism from the Perspective of Global History

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Abstract

This article explores the seventeenth-century English politician William Temple's views on Confucianism, possible sources for his knowledge of China and fundamental reasons for his extolment of Confucian thoughts. Temple has discussed Confucian thoughts and Chinese governance principles in various essays, deeming Confucius as the model of reason and virtue, praising the governance principle of "rule by virtue", and viewing Confucianism as an effective response to Europe's political crisis. Re-examining Temple's interpretation and acceptance of Confucian thoughts is conducive to clarifying the influence of Confucianism on early modern Europe and understanding the intricate mechanism of cultural connectivity and exchange in early global history.

Keywords

William Temple; Confucianism; Governance Principle; Global History.

1. Introduction

Sir William Temple (1628–1699) was one of the most internationally minded British diplomats and thinkers of the latter half of the seventeenth century, acclaimed as a "citizen of the world"[1]. Through weathering numerous political upheavals and confronting intractable conflicts, Temple gradually came to recognize the difficulty of realizing his political ideals. Consequently, he sought to extricate himself from the "arts of a court" and the "restraints of public business," turning toward a more tranquil existence[2].

During his retirement in later years (1681–1699), Temple devoted himself to scholarly pursuits, addressing in several essays about Chinese garden art, Confucian thoughts, and Chinese governance principles. In his renowned essay "Upon the Gardens of Epicurus; or of Gardening in the Year 1685" (1685), he introduced the "sharawadgi" to describe the irregular beauty of Chinese gardens. According to Qian Zhongshu, Temple was the first English writer to discuss Chinese gardens[3]. Subsequently, Temple published "An Essay upon the Ancient and Modern Learning" (1689) and "Of Heroick Virtue" (1689), responding to the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. In these essays, he examined world civilizations and expressed admiration for Confucianism and Chinese governance. As Homer E. Woodbridge noted in *Sir William Temple: The Man and His Work* (1966), "Temple was the first English political writer to regard the Chinese system of government as a model." [2] This assessment underscores Temple's pioneering role in Chinese studies.

Temple's introduction of Chinese gardening and governance exerted an enduring influence on later intellectuals. Some scholars argue that Jonathan Swift, Temple's secretary, was inspired by "Of Heroick Virtue" when writing *Gulliver's Travels*(1726). They note that the erudition of the Houyhnhnms echoes the Chinese learning described by Temple[4]. Furthermore, Temple's introduction of Chinese gardening not only laid the ideological groundwork for the Chinoiserie prevalent in eighteenth-century Europe but also facilitated the practice of English landscape architecture. In the seventeenth century, European gardens were still dominated by the formal,

symmetrical styles of France and the Netherlands. Temple's advocacy of "sharawadgi", however, paved the way for the introduction of Chinese garden aesthetics into British landscape art. According to the garden designer Christopher Thacker, "Sharawadgi became the most common weapon against the geometric garden" in the early 18th century[6]. Subsequently, the ideas were adopted and disseminated by Joseph Addison and Alexander Pope. In 1712, Addison published a series of essays titled "The Pleasures of the Imagination" in *The Spectator*, in which he argued that Chinese gardens achieved natural beauty by "conceal the Art"[7]. The following year, Pope published his essay "On Gardens" in *The Guardian*, praising the simplicity of unadorned nature. This aesthetic concept can be traced to the ideas of Temple[8].

The etymology of "Sharawadgi" remains a debate. While some scholars propose Chinese or Japanese origins, others suggest it was either Temple's invention or a multilingual phonetic transcription. In 1930, the Chinese scholar Yuanchang Zhang, based on semantic and phonetic similarities, translated it as "洒落瑰奇", meaning "careless grace, impressive and surprising"[9]. Qian Zhongshu interpreted it as "散乱疏落", describing a "space tastefully enlivened by disorder"[3]. In 2010, Lei Gao and Jan Woudstra, discussing the poetic connotations of Chinese gardens, interpreted "sharawadgi" as "poetic pictorial conception" or "lyrical pictorial splendor," conveying a sense of "poetic and picturesque emotions"[10].

On the other hand, some scholars argue for a Japanese origin. In 1931, E. V. Gatenby first proposed that "sharawadgi" derived from the Japanese word "sorowaji" (揃ハジ), meaning "not being regular"[11]. However, Japanese scholar Takau Shimada criticized Gatenby's understanding of Japanese garden art, arguing that Japanese gardening does not deliberately pursue asymmetry or irregularity but rather emphasizes harmony with nature. Shimada suggested that the Japanese source of "sharawadgi" might be "sawaraji" (触ハジ) or "sawarazu" (触ハズ), meaning "not touching" or "or "leaving things as they are"[12]. By examining early trade between Japan and the Netherlands in 1998, Ciaran Murray put forward the theory that "sorowaji" might have been misread as "sharawadgi" during its transmission[11]. More recently, in 2014, Wybe Kuitert put forward a new theory, proposing that the term originated from the Edo period Japanese word "shara'aji"[10].

In summary, current research on Temple has largely focused on his aesthetic concept of "sharawadgi" and emphasizing its role in facilitating the emergence of the English natural landscape garden in the 18th century. Actually, Temple's interest in Chinese gardens was not isolated but a part of his broader cultural vision. In his essays "An Essay upon the Ancient and Modern Learning" and "Of Heroick Virtue", he spoke highly of Confucian thought and the Chinese political system. This positive interpretation reflects Temple's intellectual approach of using "other" civilizations as a mirror, demonstrating his global perspective that transcended Eurocentrism. Therefore, re-examining Temple not only helps to critique Eurocentric narratives but also offers possibilities for a more diversified approach to world history writing[13]. Through a global history approach, this study explores Temple's views on Confucianism, investigates the possible sources of his knowledge of China, and excavates the underlying reasons for his admiration of Confucian thoughts.

2. Temple's Views on Confucian Thought

The In eighteenth-century Europe, Confucianism was often regarded by literati as "oversubtle thoughts"[3]. In Temple's view, Confucius was "the most knowledgeable, wisest, and most virtuous of men", whose writings spanned humanity, the individual, society, and government[14]. In the "Of Heroick Virtue", he explored Confucius's reflections on morality and government.

Temple admired Confucius's views on natural reason, advocating that both sovereigns and common people should strive to enhance their reason. He wrote: "That every Man ought to

study and endeavour the improving and perfecting of his own Natural Reason to the greatest height he is capable, so as he may never (or as seldom as can be) swerve from the law of nature, in the course and conduct of his life: That this, being not to be done without much Thought, Inquiry, and Diligence.”[14] In his view, governing a state should follow nature and avoid excessive intervention, like tending a garden. He also sincerely endorsed Confucius’s views on happiness and morality: “That in this perfection of natural reason consists the perfection of body and mind, and the utmost or supreme Happiness of Mankind. That the means and rules, to attain this perfection, are chiefly not to will or desire any thing but what is consonant to his natural reason, nor any thing that is not agreeable to the good and happiness of other men, as well as our own.”[14] This idea resonated with Temple’s view that “happiness is the supreme good”, considering happiness a shared goal for both the individual and society[15].

For government, Temple esteemed the Confucian idea that “governance depends on people”. He believed that a good government should be composed of individuals with high moral integrity: “no People can be happy but under good Governments, and no Governments happy but over good Men; and that, for the felicity of mankind, all Men in a Nation, from the prince to the meanest peasant, should endeavour to be Good, and Wise, and Virtuous, as far as his own thoughts, the percepts of others, or the laws of his country can instruct him.”[14]. According to this principle, the Confucian ideals of social harmony became exemplars of governance. Consequently, Temple expressed admiration for China’s imperial examination system. In his view, the examination system, as an open competitive system, embodied fairness while ensuring the quality of talent. He maintained that a state governed by philosophers selected through fair competition was superior to one ruled by decadent hereditary nobility. This ideal of “rule by philosophers” traces back to Plato’s *Republic* in the West, while in China, it was realized in practice through Confucian thought. For the individual, Temple advocated that everyone, from the noble monarch to the humble peasant, should strive to improve their self-cultivation[14]. This corresponds to the Confucian idea of “self-cultivation, a well-managed family, and the ability to administer the state and to bring peace to the nation”, as stated in *The Book of Rites*: “In ancient times, one who intended to carry forward all the inherent virtues in the world and to rid people of material desires had to first rule his state well. To rule his state well, he had to first educate his family. To educate his family, he had first to cultivate himself”[16]. Confucianism emphasizes that the cultivation of the individual’s mind and body is not only a prerequisite for personal happiness but also the foundation of state governance. This layered political vision, from the self to the family and then to the state, provided Temple with a systematic philosophical paradigm.

Temple highly affirmed Chinese civilization, attributing it to its well-constituted political system. He argued: “Whatever length it has, which by none is esteemed less than twelve or thirteen hundred miles; it must be allowed to be the greatest, richest, and most populous Kingdom now known in the World; and will perhaps be found to owe its riches, force, civility, and felicity, to the admirable constitution of its government more than any other.”[14] In his view, China’s prosperity stemmed not only from material resources and population but also from its political system based on Confucianism. Confucius integrated ethics with politics, advocating for an enlightened monarch shaped by rationality and morality, which resonates with “enlightened despotism” in the Enlightenment. Temple believed that the Confucianism of “rule by philosophers”, selecting individuals of both integrity and ability for state governance, could effectively prevent the tyranny. He wrote: “But all orders and commands of the King proceed through his Councils, and are made upon the recommendation or petition of the Council proper appointed for that affair; so that all matters are debated, determined, and communicated to the several Councils; and then, upon their advice or requests made to the King, they are ratified and signed by him, and so pass into laws, and have the force and authority of laws.”[14] The departments mentioned in the text refer to the Six Ministries of the imperial

court, each responsible for different affairs. In addition to the Six Ministries, the monarch also sought counsel from the virtuous and the wise. The selection and promotion of imperial officials were based on virtue and scholarship, not lineage or wealth[14]. This system helped to reduce factionalism, and also contributed to a rational government. As Temple stated: “Those are generally the best governments where the best men govern; and let the sort or scheme be what it will, those are ill governments where ill men govern.”[2] Temple proposed an ideal political model that a state governed by rational individuals would constitute a rational state. Amid the English Civil War and religious conflicts, Temple discovered from Chinese civilizations a ideal governance and reform methods to remedy the ills of Europe[4]. Inspired by Confucius, Temple further affirmed the Confucian ideas of governance through virtue. He believed that it offered a potential reference for malpractices of Europe.

Furthermore, Temple held China’s system of rewards and punishments in high esteem. In his view, difficulties in governance often stemmed from lax enforcement than from poor legislation. Therefore, China’s supervising and punishing judicial officials particularly advanced to him: “The two great hinges of all Governments, Reward and Punishment, are no where turned with greater care, nor exercised with more bounty and severity. Their justice is rigorous upon all offences against the law, but none more exemplary, than upon corruption in Judges. Besides this inquisition is made into their ignorance and weakness, and even into carelessness and rashness in their Sentences.”[14] Temple attributed China’s superior governance to its effective balance of virtue and law.

3. Possible Sources of Temple’s Views on Confucianism

Temple’s interest in China dates back to 1654, when his lover Dorothy Osborne recommended to him Fernando Mendez Pinto’s *The Peregrinations*(1614)[2]. This work described Pinto’s experiences in Asia and his fantasies about China, portraying the country as an enigmatic Oriental sanctuary.

Temple’s deeper understanding of Confucianism were largely indebted to the writings and correspondence of Jesuit missionaries in China. Since the 17th century, these Jesuits had come to recognize the significance of Confucian thought, viewing its moral philosophy as conducive to upholding virtues and rational order. While propagating Christian in China, they actively translated Confucian classics into Europe. Through the cultural exchange, Confucian thought was introduced into Western intellectual systems and was reinterpreted in the process. Qian Zhongshu pointed out that Temple most likely read Philippe Couplet’s *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*(1687), the earliest translation of Confucius’s complete work into European language[3]. This work served as a key medium for Temple’s initial exposure to Confucian thought, inspiring his reflections on political reform and moral philosophy. Furthermore, much of Temple’s information derived from Father Alvarez Samedo’s *Relação da Grande Monarquia da China*(1655), as his discussion of Chinese medicine shows similarities with this work[3]. Temple’s positive assessment of China’s “rule by virtue” and “governance” was influenced by the translation of Gabriel Magaillan’s *A New History of China, Containing A Description of the Most Considerable Particulars of That Vast Empire* (1688)[3]. Ge Guilu points out that Temple’s emphasis on “governance depends on people” aligns with the perspective of *the Doctrine of the Mean*. He writes: “Temple likely read the version of *the Doctrine of the Mean* translated by Philippe Couplet, which corresponds to the ideas in Chapter 20 of the text: Duke Ai inquired about governance. Confucius replied: ‘The principles of Kings Wen and Wu are preserved in historical records. When talented people exist, their governance prevails; when such individuals perish, their governance ceases. Human nature drives governance effectively, just as fertile soil accelerates the growth of trees. Governance should be as adaptable as the reed.

Therefore, the essence of governance lies in selecting the right people.”[17] This further supports the likelihood that Temple had read *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*.

Western academic circles have also explored the channels through which Temple encountered Confucian thought. Woodbridge suggested: “Temple drew also upon the histories of China by F. Alvarez Semedo and Gabriel de Magalhães.”[2] He indicated that Temple likely read Nieuhoff’s *An Embassy of the Dutch East India Company to the Tartar Cham, Emperour of China* (1665) and drew on its accounts of the imperial examination system, the Six Ministries, and Confucian thought[15]. There are commonalities between Temple’s and Nieuhoff’s descriptions: the sequence of their presentations is consistent, and Temple’s figures for the number of Chinese capital and provincial cities closely follow Nieuhoff’s[2]. Clara Marburg emphasized that Temple demonstrated a strong interest in the work, which indirectly corroborates the possible source of his ideas[15]. In addition to these documents, Temple claimed to have consulted Chinese historical materials written by Martino Martini and Athanasius Kircher[2]. His account of China suffering three invasions by the Tartars shows a high consistency with Martini’s *The History of the Late Invasion and Conquest of That Flourishing Kingdom of China by the Tartars* (1654)[2].

From a global historical perspective, Sir William Temple’s diverse channels for acquiring Chinese knowledge reflect the cultural interactions between East and West. Since the seventeenth century, intensified global connections and frequent flows of commodities, people, and information fostered multidimensional nodes of cross-civilizational exchange[13]. Against this backdrop, Temple’s interpretation of Confucianism highlights the role of Chinese culture as a pivotal node within intercultural knowledge systems. China entered the European imagination not merely as a geographical entity, but also as an alternative model of political organization. As Temple noted, “the Kingdom of China seems to be framed to the utmost force and reach of Human Wisdom, Reason, and Prudence; and in practice to excel the very speculations of other Men, and all those imaginary schemes of the European Wits, the Institutions of *Xenophon*, the Republick of *Plato*, the *Utopia’s* or *Oceana’s* of our Modern Writers.”[14] In this assessment, Temple not only affirmed China’s governance practices but also emphasized their superiority over European political ideals. Such a cosmopolitan outlook transcended traditional Eurocentric views by acknowledging the subjectivity and historical agency of other civilizations. As highlighted by global history, Europe never advanced in isolation; many of its so-called independent achievements emerged from complex and dynamic global interactions[13]. Temple’s views attest to this: “That the different Governments of it are framed and cultivated by as great reaches and strength of reason and of wisdom, as any of ours...the same honours and obedience are in all places but conferences or tributes paid to the same heroick virtue, or transcendent genius, in what parts forever, or under what climates of the World, it fortunes to appear.”[14] Thus, Temple’s engagement with Confucianism was a product of civilizations referencing, dialoguing, and reconstructing one another within early modern global networks. This embodied the “exchange relationship” central to global history as a perspective and method[13].

4. Fundamental Reasons for Temple’s Advocacy of Confucianism

What prompted William Temple, a seventeenth-century Western scholar, to develop profound interest in with the Eastern philosopher Confucius from the fifth century BCE? The motivations can be understood from the following three perspectives.

First, the historical context of Temple’s era shared similarities with the Spring and Autumn Period in which Confucius lived. In the latter half of the seventeenth century, Europe was grappling with the aftermath of the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648) and the escalating Anglo-French struggle for hegemony (1667–1714), which fueled a growing call for “heroic virtue”.

Similarly, Confucius's era witnessed the decline of the Zhou Dynasty and the collapse of ritual order. Yet, it was also a time of intellectual flourishing, known as the "Hundred Schools of Thought", which eagerly sought new ideas and renewal[18]. Thus, both seventeenth-century Europe and the Spring and Autumn Period in China faced social challenges and an urgent need to resolve conflicts and establish well-ordered societies. In Temple's view, Confucius had articulated a moral framework over two millennia earlier that enabled China to achieve enduring stability and popular prosperity. This made Confucian thought a valuable intellectual reference for Europe, inspiring Temple to turn to it in promoting his own ideals of heroic virtue[19].

Second, the shared belief in moral philosophy as the foundation of social order formed a key point of convergence between Temple's and Confucius's thought. Both thinkers started from the same premise: the pursuit of an ethical remedy for personal and social well-being. As Chen Xijun notes, "Historical Western heroes were celebrated mainly for military achievements, but without establishing sound political order, they could not be considered true heroes. To identify heroic virtue that surpassed mere prowess, Temple had to look beyond the West." [20] Temple maintained that an ideal political order must be grounded in elevated moral philosophy, and China, guided by Confucianism, served as the exemplary model.

Finally, the rise of the Enlightenment led Temple to seek theoretical support in Confucianism for constraining monarchical power and promoting rational governance. His "Of Heroick Virtue" in 1689, coincided with the early Enlightenment, when balancing monarchical authority became a central concern. Two primary means of restraining rulers were recognized: moral constraints and legal constraints[21]. Confucianism, with its emphasis on "rule by virtue" and "benevolent governance", provided Temple with a theoretical basis for constructing a model of paternal government founded on natural reason and morality[22].

5. Conclusion

William Temple's interpretation and advocacy of Confucian thought reflect not only his personal political philosophy but also the active engagement and critical reflection of seventeenth-century European intellectuals toward Eastern civilization within the context of early global cultural exchange. Confronted with intense partisan strife in England, Temple turned to the political wisdom of China, seeking intellectual resources in Confucianism for institutional rationality and moral order. Through multiple channels, including Jesuit translations, Dutch travel accounts, and other related texts, he absorbed the core Confucianism of "rule by virtue". From a global history perspective, Temple did not regard China as a passive other but instead recognized its intellectual agency. By re-examining Temple's interpretation and reception of Confucianism helps illuminate the influence of Confucian thought on early modern Europe and deepens our understanding of the complex mechanisms of early global intellectual interconnection and cultural co-construction.

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