Ezra Pound and Confucius

Ezra Pound’s engagement with China is part of his modernistic credo cast in the programmatic motto of “Make It New.” For Pound, there was no doubt that this project of newness would be realized in the field of a cross-cultural basis of poetry. After all, the term poetry derives from the Greek word “ποιεω” [poieo] which means “to make.” The polyglot Pound knew that poetry would be the primary medium for the creation and expression of “newness.” He practiced and proved this poetic pursuit of newness throughout his whole life. Surprisingly, or maybe not surprisingly, he turned away from his original training in Romance languages and classical education to look for newness in other parts of the world than America and Europe. His break with the Euro-American tradition in search for newness elsewhere eventually led to his evocation of aspects of the Chinese tradition (North 2013).

Ezra Pound’s life journey from his birth in the provincial state of Idaho and an incomplete academic education at the University of Pennsylvania on the East Coast to stays in Europe is enhanced by linguistic and cultural journeys into the traditions of Eastern and Western civilizations. Literary scholars are familiar with Ezra Pound’s excursions into the intricacies of the Chinese language by way of Chinese poetry, which I want to review for his engagement with Confucian thought and American politics. Pound’s life-long fascination with the Chinese language and Confucius begins in the early 1910s in London. His first contact with Chinese poetry coincides with his first reading of Confucius. When the widow of the Harvard trained art historian, philosopher, and sociologist Ernest Fenollosa asked Pound in 1913 to edit and publish her late husband’s manuscript The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry, he had started reading Confucius’s four classical works in the nineteenth-century French translation of Guillaume Pauthier (1841). Both the editorial work and Confucian thought influenced Pound’s concept of innovative modern poetry and his political career. Fenollosa’s manuscript was the result of a collaboration with his Japanese colleague Kainan Mori during his professorship at Tokyo Imperial University from 1878 on, where he lectured on continental philosophy and sociology. Supported by Mori, Fenollosa, proficient in Japanese, also studied traditional Chinese poetry without a proper knowledge of that language. In his interlinear manuscript, he provided English words underneath each Chinese character without any connectives. Poets praised the scholar’s ideas and English renditions of Chinese
poetry, but sinologists have pointed to the glaring philological deficiencies. In a thorough linguistic analysis, the sinologist George A. Kennedy calls Fenollosa’s essay “a small mass of confusion. Within the limits of forty-four pages [he] gallops determinedly in various directions, tilting at the unoffending windmills” (Kennedy 1958, 25). After the publication of the manuscript, Eastern and Western scholars shifted the critique of Fenollosa’s philological mistakes to Pound and likewise blamed him for misreading the Chinese writing system. R. John Williams argues:

Pound and Fenollosa entirely misunderstood the nature of the Chinese writing system, fixating somewhat blindly on its more exotic secondary elements. Pound even thought that Chinese ideography was so pictographically transparent (as opposed to phonetic writing), that one could decipher the characters without even knowing Chinese.

(Williams 2009, 150)

In support, Williams cites Zhang Longxi’s expertise against seeing the Chinese writing as pictographic or ideographic “because the characters are linguistic signs of concepts and represent sound and meaning of words rather than pictographic representations of things themselves” (Zhang 1999a, 44). Yet, in spite of the linguistic pitfalls, Pound’s interaction with Chinese poetry in his editorial work, substantiated by his simultaneous reading of Confucius, became a turning point in the intercultural relations between the East and the West.

Inspired by Fenollosa’s collection of Chinese poems, Ezra Pound engaged in a new concept of translation, which he himself called “re-creation,” critics “creative translation” (see Cheadle 1997, 29) or “translucences” (see Kennedy 2009, 24). In a letter to Iris Barry, he brags in 1916: “Really one DON’T need to know a language. One NEEDS, damn all needs, to know the few hundred words in the few really good poems that any language has in it” (Pound 1950, 93). Hence, his “re-creation” of Chinese poems, published as Cathay in 1915, which Williams considers one of the “modernist scandals” (Williams 2009, 160), takes on a new meaning from the perspective of cross-cultural exchange. In the full title of this first product of a new modern poetry, “Translations by Ezra Pound, For the most Part from the Chinese of Rihaku, From the Notes of the late Ernest Fenollosa, and the Decipherings of the Professors Mori and Ariga,” Pound itemizes the collaborative efforts of Chinese, Japanese, and American poets as well as critics in launching a new poetic program correlating different systems of language and culture. To a certain extent, it corresponds to Zhang Longxi’s idea of translating cultures between China and the West beyond “an overemphasis on difference and cultural uniqueness” or “ethnocentric biases” (Zhang 1999b, 46). Citing several poets and critics, Mary Cheadle claims that Pound’s “uncanny understanding of Chinese poetry … enabled him to see into the essence of the poem with a perspicuity unearned by his limited sinological training” (Cheadle 1997, 46). T.S. Eliot saw his fellow poet as “the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time” (Fang 1959[1954], xv). His turn to Chinese poetry became part of the growing interest of Western writers in the visibly different writing systems of Asian literatures and added an important aspect to the emergence of the imagist movement and modern poetry.

Equally important for Ezra Pound’s poetic turn to China was his reading of Confucius. Rather than using the nineteenth-century English translation by James Legge available in London in the 1910s, he read Pauthier’s French translation of Confucius’s classics. His fascination with the long tradition of Chinese civilization as distilled in Confucius’s thought represented a double revolutionary aspect in politics and culture. In China, the founders of the First Republic in 1912, which had ended 4,000 years of Chinese dynasties, wanted to
move away from the Chinese imperial history including the legacy of Confucius. Instead, intellectuals and political minds, who—like the first president of the Republic Sun Yat-sen or one of its officials F.T. Song—had attended schools in the United States or England, introduced political and philosophical ideas of Western thinking. Pound met F.T. Song in London in 1914 and arranged for the publication of his article “The Causes and Remedy of the Poverty of China” in *The Egoist*, in which Song formulated his “attack on Confucianism” (Qian 2009, 131–32; Qian 2003). At the same time, intellectuals and writers in the West discovered the worlds of Eastern philosophies and learning. Hence Pound’s modern position of innovation by way of Chinese poetry and civilization challenges the anti-Confucian stance of Chinese intellectuals and advocates the Western appreciation of Chinese culture. Qian cites Pound’s introductory note to and disapproval with some positions of Song’s article and his cross-cultural statement: “At a time when China has replaced Greece in the intellectual life of so many occidentals, it is interesting to see in what way the occidental ideas are percolating into the orient” (quoted from *Poetry and Prose* in Qian 2009, 132).

Pound’s leading role in the cultural turn from classical western to Chinese sources coincides with his composition of a series of essays, which are later published under the title of *MAKE IT NEW* (Pound 1935). In these essays, Pound rediscovers poets and traditions from various cultures and times. He is particularly fascinated with poetic forms of the past, medieval poetry of the troubadours in the Provençal language, translations, and the tradition of English literature. These essays also seem to be under the influence of his perception of Chinese ideograms and the long tradition of the Chinese empire (Pound 1935, 7ff.; Symons 1987). In *Ezra Pound’s Confucian Translations*, Mary Cheadle traces the different stages of the poet-critic’s engagement with the Chinese philosopher and the Chinese language. Following a first reading in the 1910s and Pound’s disagreement with Chinese intellectuals’ anti-Confucianism, his recognition of the importance of the cultural tradition for newness leads to his second reception of Confucius in the 1920s and his intention to translate the philosopher’s works. In 1928, Mary Cheadle records, Pound “produced only one of the Confucian classics, the *Da Xue* or *Great Learning* and, having no facility with the Chinese language, … he simply retranslated Pauthier’s *La Grande Etude*” (Cheadle 1997, 23). In the mid-1930s, however, Pound started learning Chinese seriously, which on the one hand resulted in the series of Chinese Cantos (LII–LXI), and on the other hand in his later translations of Confucius from the Chinese. When he published his version of *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius* in 1954, he was praised by poets Richard Wilbur and I.A. Richards as “the first translator of our age” respectively “Mr. Pound at his best” (Kennedy 1958, 24). The Harvard sinologist Achilles Fang, one of Pound’s linguistic consultants (Cheadle 1997, 50), claimed in the “Introduction” to this volume that “Pound now emerges as a Confucian poet” (Fang 1959[1954], xv). In the 1960s, critics even maintained that these innovations played a fundamental role in the overall development of twentieth-century literature. Donald Davie extends this line of thought:

> The quality of Chinese poetry is exactly that quality which our poetry, in the present century, has adapted itself specifically to secure. In particular, one of the 20th-century English poetic styles, imagist *vers libre*, might have been (and partly was) devised deliberately to give the translator from the Chinese just what he wants and needs to function intelligently.

*(Davie 1965, 704)*

This cross-cultural interaction essentially contributes to the emergence of modernism and the imagist movement in the 1910s, according to Pound’s programmatic imperative “MAKE IT
As part of his return to Confucius and the Chinese tradition in the 1930s he finds the source of this modernist credo on the bathtub of Emperor Tching from the Shang dynasty in the second century BCE and gives it a prominent place in his Chinese Cantos. It is the central theme in Canto LIII (published in 1940; Pound 1957, 274–275).

The rendition of Emperor Tching Tang’s rule and his practice of daily renewal expressed in the Chinese characters (xin ri ri xin) is a phrase which Pound found both in *Histoire générale de la Chine* written by the French Jesuit Joseph-Anne-Marie de Moyriac de Mailla during his stay in Beijing in the early eighteenth century and in Confucius’s *Da Hue*, or *Great Digest* (Cheadle 1997, 226). Pound’s purpose in the ten Chinese Cantos, which are all based on de Mailla’s *Histoire générale*, was the representation of the history of Chinese civilization as a foil for his discussion of the politics of the Early Republic of the United States focused on the role of the second president John Adams in the following ten Cantos (LXII–LXXI). “Make It New” serves as a link between Emperor Tching Tang and President Adams of the new American nation. Since in Canto LIII Pound covers China’s imperial history from the second century BCE to the life of Confucius, the aesthetic credo also takes on a political dimension to be derived from the emperor’s actions and the philosopher’s ideas. After seven years of drought, the emperor cannot end the population famine by financial means when no grain grows. Not money, but only the Emperor’s prayer for rain on the mountain and his new imperative of a daily renewal in line with the supreme deity Chang Ti and the people will restore the balance between heaven and earth. This story is related to the legendary book by Kao-Yao, in which the common people are endowed with great power: “Heaven can see and hear and that through the eyes and ears of the people; heaven rewards the people of virtue and punishes the wicked ones and that through the people” (Qu Wanli 1966, 22). Cheadle also stresses such a political reading pointing to Tching Tang’s Shang Dynasty, which replaced the Hsia Dynasty in 1766 (Cheadle 1997, 227). This interpretation of the poem also corresponds to Pound’s political beliefs in the 1930s, his position against capitalism.

**Figure 13.1 The Cantos of Ezra Pound** (London: Faber, 1957) 274–275

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and financial operations and his call for a regeneration of the West, as advanced in his 1937 essay “Immediate Need of Confucius” (Pound 1973, 89–94).

Confucius and the Founding Fathers

Confucius’s ideas of order and the proper conduct of leaders in relation to their people have informed Pound’s literary and political career from the 1910s on. In the 1920s he dedicates Canto XIII to this harmonious interaction between the self, the family, and the prince:

And Kung said, and wrote on the bo leaves:
If a man have not order within him
He can not spread order about him;
And if a man have not order within him
His family will not act with due order;
And if the prince have not order within him
He can not put order in his dominions.
(Pound 1957, 63)

This principle of a male authorial hierarchy within an ordered community, unencumbered by any financial obligations, seems to have been the ideal situation which Pound wanted to realize for his own time in the 1930s and which he deduced from his collaborative reading of Chinese civilization and the foundation of the United States of America, based on Confucius. The focus on “MAKE IT NEW” in the 1930s in Canto LIII as well as in the publication of the collection of essays in 1935 and its revolutionary interpretation connects the period of Italian Fascism with Confucianism and the Early Republic in America. The correlation in Pound’s essay of “Jefferson and/or Mussolini” was based—according to Cheadle—on “the Confucian principle of ‘good internal government’ …. For Pound, both Fascism and Confucianism perceived the state—an ethical, economic, social and political totality—as the important context in which to place the individual, the family, and the community” (Cheadle 1997, 83–84). Canto LIII and “MAKE IT NEW” on Emperor Tching Tang’s bathtub is the second of ten Chinese Cantos, which are located between two series of American Cantos (Hornung 1994, 308).

The publication of “Eleven New Cantos” (XXXI–XLI) in 1934 represents Pound’s intertextual examination of private and public documents of the Founding Fathers. From the perspective of his Confucian knowledge he uses excerpts from letters and essays by George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren to evaluate the ideas and values involved in the American revolution and the political independence from Great Britain. At the same time, he also points to the exclusion of Indigenous nations and African slaves from the political union and blames the monetary system for negative behavior. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson are privileged and come close to the ideals of Confucian philosophy. Hence George Kearns argues that Pound uses the epistolary quotations from the second and third presidents of the United States “to measure the letters against the teachings of Confucius” and to reveal that “throughout the correspondence” both presidents “are concerned with the precise definition of terms, which lies at the heart of the Confucian ethic” (Kearns 1980, 80). In the comparison of the two presidents, John Adams seems to encapsulate for Pound the ideal of a Confucian leader. The series of the Chinese Cantos (LII–LXI) is immediately followed by the John Adams Cantos (LXII–LXXI) in which Pound actually draws a line between God and
Adams equating the idea of liberty emanating from God with the Congress and the president: “GOD SAVE LIBERTY THE CONGRESS AND ADAMS” printed in caps and a semi-circle (Pound 1957, 390). His singular position as a strong leader, who guarantees peace, also distinguishes his politics from that of his successor Jefferson, who favored a native aristocracy, as expressed in his letter to Jefferson: “You fear the one, I the few” (Pound 1957, 429). These political discussions involved in the foundation of the United States reveal the Founding Fathers’ intention to move away from the ruling model of monarchy of their English colonizers and to turn to French and classical sources of political knowledge. Choosing the state form of a republic with a senate obviously evokes the Roman example of government, later substantiated in the classical architecture of the capital Washington, D.C. The rapprochement between America and France, which supported the American cause of independence from England, and the embracement of the political ideas of Enlightenment philosophers for the separation of power in a democracy also created a link to the discovery of Confucius. It is not surprising that Pound knew about the important role of the Jesuits and their role as transcultural mediators between China and Europe, especially France, where their important publications were printed. In Canto LX, Pound situates his description of the Jesuits’ missionary role in China in the seventeenth century between the China Cantos and the Adams Cantos, which implicitly marks the transfer of ideas between the two countries. Yet, it was the work of the American Enlightenment figure Benjamin Franklin, who first made Confucian ideas available to Americans by way of French and English sources.

The first encounter of Europeans with Confucius was the work of Jesuits who from the sixteenth century on went to China and gained access to the court and scholars by learning the Chinese language and starting to translate the works of Confucius. First efforts by Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci, who believed that the adaptation of Christianity to Confucianism was the best way of evangelizing China (Meynard 2011, 7), finally resulted in the cooperation of four Jesuits in the seventeenth century who provided the first translation of the Analects in Latin: *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus. Sive Sciencia Sinensis* (1687). Rather than publishing it in the Jesuit home base of Rome with the support of the Pope, they had it published from the Royal Press in Paris in 1687 under the auspices of the French King Louis XIV “for the highest benefit of the Oriental Mission and of the Republic of Letters” (Meynard 2011, 81). Under the guidance of the Italian Prospero Intorcetta, two Belgians, Philippe Couplet and Francis de Rougement, and the Austrian Christian Herdtrich, who together had spent most of the seventeenth century in China, offered a translation of the works of Confucius, which served both as a manual for Jesuit missionaries and as a basis for the Christianization of China to be undertaken by the French Sun King. The Jesuit scholar Thierry Meynard, SJ, has reproduced this first Confucian translation in 2011 in a multilingual modern edition of Chinese, Latin, and English. In his long introduction, Meynard calls this classic translation of Confucian works an exercise in “cross-cultural hermeneutics” (Meynard 2011, 3). Pointing to the two decisive moments in history in the East and the West, namely the transition between the Ming and Qing Dynasties and the rise of modern China, respectively the discovery of the New World and the Renaissance, he sees in the translation an “interaction between Jesuits and Chinese scholars” and a “discussion between Neo-confucianism and Western philosophy” (Meynard 2011, 26). And he also registers an important change of attitude:

… the first generation of Jesuits saw Chinese thought lacking in logic. In contrast to this view, the *Sinarum Philosophus* attempts to exhibit the logical features of the Confucian classics and to explain them with terms borrowed from Western logics.

(Meynard 2011, 54)
This basis of cross-cultural learning seems to inform the age of Enlightenment in Europe and America. The German Enlightenment philosopher, mathematician, and diplomat Georg Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) can serve as an example. His reading of Confucius Sinarum Philosophus prompts his Latin language response Novissima Sinica (Leibniz 1979[1697]). The Newest from China for Leibniz is the report about the official permission to Christianize China, which for him opens a cross-cultural exchange. Not only does he launch in his study the idea of Chinese as a world language and the idea of cosmopolitanism, but he also insists on learning from China, the application of a practical philosophy, and a form of life based on reason (Leibniz 1979[1697], 19). He explicitly spells out this mutual cultural exchange between East and West:

Certe talis nostrarum rerum mihi videtur esse conditio gliscentibus in immensum corruptelis, ut propemodum necessarium videatur missionarios Sinesium ad nos mitti, qui Theologiae naturalis usum prxinque nos doceant, quemadmodum nos illis mittimus, qui Theologiam eos doceant revelatam.

(Leibniz 1979[1697], 18)

In view of the immense rise of moral corruption, the nature of our present conditions seems to make it necessary that missionaries from China are sent to us who can teach us the use and praxis of a natural theology, in the same way in which we send them ours who teach them the revealed theology.

(my translation)

The progress from the “sinicization of the Jesuits” to the “Sinophilism of the 18th century philosophes” by way of The First Translation of the Confucian Classics is for Donald F. Lach also the silent recognition that the East was more advanced than the West (Lach I 1965, Bk 2, 801; xiii). Hence, it is no surprise that Confucius absorbed the space of “the patron saint of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment” (Reichwein 1925, 77).

Benjamin Franklin, who was “the first and foremost American Sinophile” (Aldridge 1993, 25), must have had access to an English version of the Latin text. Jean de la Brune and Louis Cousin provided the first English translation, The morals of Confucius, a Chinese philosopher who flourished above five hundred years before the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: being one of the most choicest pieces of learning remaining of that nation, which was published in London by Randal Taylor in 1691. It is interesting that the translators also interpret the Latin title by specifying Confucius’s philosophy as morality and by relating it to Christianity. The correlation of Confucian and Christian ideas for moral conduct became part of Enlightenment thinking which looked for rational explanations. Benjamin Franklin’s reference to America’s religious tradition, which he recalls in the first part of his Autobiography, gradually advances to scientific concepts and the construction of the rational design of Deism. His reception of Confucius’s ideas and the Chinese tradition, in which—according to Max Weber—the belief in a transcendental being did not exist (see Weber 1964[1916]), helps Franklin to make that transition. As early as 1737, he reproduces in two consecutive issues of his journal, The Pennsylvania Gazette, excerpts and summaries from Confucius for his readers. It is unclear what kind of source Franklin used, a partial copy of a London pamphlet The Morals of Confucius, a Chinese philosopher (1691), a translation from a French work, or an abridged translation of the Latin. We also do not know whether Franklin’s summary of Confucius’s ideas is his original or a reprint from another source. What is essential, however, is the fact that the passages reproduced in the journal conformed with the American pragmatic philosopher and
scientist’s model of self-perfection as exemplified in the catalogue of virtues in the second part of his *Autobiography* written while in Paris for the peace treaty with England in 1784 (Franklin 1964, 149–150). In the first *Pennsylvania Gazette* coverage, entitled “From the Morals of Confucius,” Franklin focuses precisely on the importance of arriving at virtuous perfection, which the reading of Confucius’s work would help to realize:

This Book is, as it were, the Gate through which it is necessary to pass to arrive at the sublimest Wisdom, and most perfect. The philosopher here treats of three considerable Things.

1. Of what we ought to do to cultivate our Minds, and regulate our Manners.
2. Of the Method by which it is necessary to instruct and guide others, And,
3. Of the Care that every one ought to have to tend to the Sovereign Good, to adhere thereunto, and, as I may so say, to repose himself therein. …

The great Secret, says Confucius, to acquire true Knowledge, the Knowledge, consequently, worthy of Princes, and the most illustrious Personages, is to cultivate and polish the Reason, which is the Present that we have received from Heaven.

*(Franklin 1737/8)*

Franklin’s summary of Confucius’s work at the beginning of his article precisely follows the progress from individual perfection to the care for others and the contribution to the public good. It conforms with Ezra Pound’s perception of Confucius’s belief in the meaningful interaction of the self, the family and the leader in Canto XIII. Early on in his life Franklin decided to pursue the goal of virtuous perfection for which he designed a catalogue of thirteen virtues, which are—as Wang documents—“inspired by The Morals of Confucius” (Wang 2007, 4). In support, Wang proceeds to list Franklin’s thirteen virtues and shows how the American Founding Father reproduced the Chinese philosopher’s previous formulations by quoting the sources in Confucius’s work underneath his own versions (Wang 2007, 2–4). Only virtues 3 “Order” and 11 “Tranquility” are Franklin’s own and do not have a Confucian equivalent. According to Wang’s line of argument Franklin followed “the path for virtuous perfection—from oneself, family to state and the whole empire” as designed by Confucius (Wang 2007, 2). Essential in this concept of virtuous perfection is the self-discipline of all members “carrying out prescribed roles—in an organized, hierarchical system” (Nisbett 2003, 6). Franklin also recognizes that in Confucius’s thought Knowledge and Reason are presents from Heaven for Princes and Illustrious Personages, who need to live by these virtues. For Confucius, Emperor Yao [sic] is such an exemplary leader who—as Franklin relates—

practis’d all these Duties, which have been propos’d by Confucius …. He in a Word, regulated his Love, and all his Passions, according to right Reason. The Prince arriv’d at the Empire 2357 years before Jesus Christ, he Reign’d an Hundred Years; but he Rul’d with so much Prudence and Kindness to his Subjects, that they were the happiest People of the Earth.

*(Franklin 1737/8)*

Confucius’s example of Emperor Yao represents for Franklin all leadership qualities required for self-disciplined and morally virtuous politicians in the service of the American people in a rational age. In addition, his example also guarantees the pursuit of happiness as one of the
inalienable rights next to life and liberty with which all human people are endowed by their Creator as laid down in the Declaration of Independence. Both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson affirmed the connection between the practice of virtues and happiness as prefigured in Confucius (see Wang 2014, 14–20). In the same way in which Confucian ideas enter the political documents of the Early Republic, they also become instrumental in their leaders’ moving away both from the corruptive system of monarchical powers in Europe and from the primary religious orientation of the Puritan colonists. To a certain extent, the Founding Fathers of America were motivated by a similar spirit of innovation as the founders of the First Chinese Republic in 1912, following Pound’s Confucian-derived dictum of “MAKE IT NEW.” The Founding Fathers’ repeated references to the prefiguration of Christian beliefs in Confucian moral ideas help to promote the formation of a virtuous statecraft and a mundane society. It allows them to see in the Chinese sage a moral force that takes the place of a Christ figure in Enlightenment America. In this sense, Franklin recommends Confucius to the missionary George Whitefield as an example for a purposeful life in the following letter:

I am glad to hear that you have frequent opportunities of preaching among the great. If you can gain them to a good and exemplary life, wonderful changes will follow in the manners of the lower ranks; for, Ad Exemplum Regis, &c. On this principle Confucius, the famous eastern reformer, proceeded. When he saw his country sunk in vice, and wickedness of all kinds triumphant, he applied himself first to the grandees; and having by his doctrine won them to the cause of virtue, the commons followed in multitudes. The mode has a wonderful influence on mankind; and there are numbers that perhaps fear less the being in Hell, than out of the fashion. Our more western reformation began with the ignorant mob; and when numbers of them were gained, interest and party-views drew in the wise and great. Where both methods can be used, reformation are like to be more speedy.  

("To George Whitefield” 6 July 1749. Franklin 1961, 383)

Thomas Paine went one step further when he compared Confucius to Jesus Christ in “Of the Old and New Testament”:

As a book of morals, there are several parts of the New Testament that are good; but they are no other than what had been preached in the Eastern world several hundred years before Christ was born. Confucius, the Chinese philosopher, who lived five hundred years before the time of Christ, says, Acknowledge thy benefits by the return of benefits, but never revenge injuries.

(Paine 1794, 140–141)

The emergence of Confucius as “the patron saint of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment” tied in with the need of virtuous leaders in a new republic. James Madison, who hung a portrait of Confucius in his Virginia home, reformulated Confucian ideas in his engagement for the Constitution:

The aim of every political Constitution is or ought to be first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of society; and in the next place, to take the most effectual precautions for keeping them virtuous whilst they continue to hold their public trust.

(Madison 1788; see also Wang 2014, 13)
Likewise, Thomas Jefferson embraced these Confucian ideas, moving away from the Puritan legacy of America in favor of “a practical religion that advanced private virtue, such as Confucianism” (Wang 2014, 20). When he became the third president of the United States he reemphasized in his Inaugural Address the application of the Confucian body of thought as a moral force for the well-being of the new American nation (see Jefferson 2006). Furthermore, Collin Wells discovered a Chinese poem from Confucius’s *The Book of Odes* in Jefferson’s scrapbook that praises Prince Wei as an exemplary leader (Wells 2007, 626; see also Wang 2014, 21–22). Dave Wang, who has researched the connections between Confucianism and America extensively, summarizes:

> The founders tried to develop good morals to ensure that the democratic system would function in correct direction. They attempted to use Confucian moral philosophy to safeguard the democratic system, build private virtue, and bring up citizens with good morals to serve the new nation. Through the founders’ efforts, Confucian moral philosophy contributed greatly to the formation of the American virtue.

(Wang 2014, 23)

The philosophical and political interest in Confucianism became part of a general interest in China in Europe, but particularly in the United States. As Dave Wang demonstrates in a series of articles, Chinese knowledge and inventions entered the American public life (see Wang 2007, 2010). Thomas Paine published a series of works about China in the *Pennsylvania Magazine* based on travel reports by Swedish seamen (Aldridge 1993, 35). Benjamin Franklin’s library in Philadelphia contained the widest selection of books on China and his extensive reading confirmed his belief that China was “the most ancient, and from long Experience the wisest of Nations” (Franklin to Sarah Bache, 26 Jan 1784, unpublished; see also Wang 2010, 151). Wilton S. Dillon summarizes Wang’s findings on China’s influence on the Foundation of America:

> Confucian philosophy, tea, porcelain, wallpaper, rhubarb, soybeans, house heating, canal and ship building, ideas about reason, rocketry, and alternative medicine, were among the contributions from China. Franklin designed a wooden wall inspired by the Great Wall to protect Philadelphia from Indians after the French and Indian War. Jefferson’s architecture showed hints of Chinese design.

(Dillon 2015, 110)

In terms of trade, the new American nation also turned away from England and started commerce with China. In 1784, a first ship, aptly named “The Empress of China,” sailed from New York to China to return with the coveted products a year later. The final and publicly visible marker of Confucius’s role for the American nation is his inclusion among the three law givers, who figure on the eastern pediment of the US Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C., which was designed by the architect Cass Gilbert and completed in 1935. The sculptor Hermon A. MacNeil chose the Biblical figure of Moses flanked by the Athenian Solon on the left and the Chinese philosopher on the right to represent the three great civilizations that have influenced the United States. At the same time in the 1930s, Ezra Pound had started learning the Chinese language for his renewed interest in Confucius’s works and was composing his Chinese and American Cantos in which he discovered the motto of “Make It New” as the poetic and political imperative of renewal, also the topic in
the published collection of his essays. His return to the long tradition of the Chinese civilization and its apparent influence on the constitution of the First Republic repeats itself in the architectural design of the Supreme Court building in which the interdependence of the three past civilizations and the young American nation is carved in stone for ongoing guidance. This American recognition of the Chinese sage can also be considered a motivation for the Chinese authorities to choose his name for the promotion of Chinese culture in the form of the Confucius Institutes.

Confucius Institutes in the twenty-first century

In the “Preface” of the Sinarum Philosophus the Jesuit translators provide a biographical sketch of Confucius and write: “For more than two thousand years, a grateful Chinese posterity has bestowed much honor on its Master, and even more on his works and his teaching” (Meynard 2011, 241). With some minor exceptions, this holds true for most of the Chinese dynasties for whom the Confucian classics represented “a manual for government, addressed mostly to the ruler” (Meynard 2011, 61). The move away from Confucianism in public life seems to be part of a process of modernization and new political orientations in China as well as in America and Europe. In China, the social and economic conditions of Confucius’s life at the end of the slavery period and the beginning of a feudal society contradicted the positions of modern governments and political programs in the twentieth century. The critical biographical evaluation also extended to the body of his works compiled and complemented by his disciples. Hence, the founders of the first Chinese Republic and the progressive republican leaders of the May Fourth Movement of 1919 in Beijing felt that Confucius could not be “revered in an urban-industrial society to the same extent as he was in traditional China’s agricultural society” (Zhang and Schwartz 1997, 206). The adaptation of Western democratic ideas for the constitution of the republic implied a departure from the imperial and philosophical tradition of China, which Pound deplored and counteracted in his poetry and essays. Political reasons also determined Mao Zedong’s classification of Confucius as part of the past to be overcome by the formation of a new Chinese society. In his 1940 essay “On New Democratism” he explains: “Those who worship Confucius and advocate reading the classics of Confucianism stand for old ethics, old rites and old thoughts against the new culture and new thought. … As imperialist culture and semi-feudal culture serve imperialism and the feudal class, they should be eliminated” (quoted in Zhang and Schwartz 1997, 195). This outright rejection of Confucius and his ideas changed in the initial phase of the People’s Republic of China. While denouncing the historical context of the philosopher’s lifetime, Mao Zedong and his Communist Party claimed the traditional allegiance to the political system and loyalty to the leaders for the national identity of the People’s Republic. This ambivalence toward the past, the simultaneous distance from Confucius and acceptance of convenient aspects of Confucianism, constitutes the principle of “critical inheritance” adopted by political leaders before and after the Cultural Revolution (see Zhang and Schwartz 1997). The radical turn against the past between 1966 and 1976 transformed public life despite all forms of the long standing Chinese tradition. It is only in the Opening up and Reform period launched by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s that the practice of a critical inheritance returned which allowed for the appreciation of Confucius as a spiritual force in China and for the sensible reservations about the social conditions in which he lived and when his ideas emerged. Zhang and Schwartz mention two political moments which were instrumental in restoring the legacy of Confucius in contemporary Chinese society. One was the establishment of the Chinese Association of Confucius Study in Qu Fu, which advocated
the rejection of Confucius’s vices and the recognition of his virtues to be “assimilated into the Four Modernizations—industry, agriculture, national defense, science and technology.” The second event was the commemoration of the 2,540th anniversary of Confucius’s birth in 1989 and the official “acceptance of the Confucian tradition” (Zhang and Schwartz 1997, 203). It simply reconfirmed that the Confucian tradition “remains the defining characteristic of Chinese mentality” (Wei-Ming 1991, 136). Both events prepared the way for creating a platform for the promotion of Chinese culture at home and abroad.

In the cultural competition between the increasing influence of Western ideas and the preservation of the Chinese tradition the significance of Confucius as a transcultural and transnational figure became a decisive moment. Increasingly the Westernization was accompanied by an Easternization following the Confucian dictum of “correspondence in difference.” The gradual economic rise of China to compete with the economic status of the United States also took on a cultural component. In view of the pervasive presence and availability of American cultural products, like TV series, movies, music, and the possibilities of online communication and games on the Internet, which display in Edward Said’s terminology the powerful impact of cultural imperialism (Said 1993), the Chinese government launched their own programs of cultural messages. Thus, President Hu Jintao started to counteract the dominance of American soft power and proposed a Chinese soft power initiative. The field of cultural diplomacy became a new component of public diplomacy in an effort to promote the Chinese language and culture along with the public perception of China abroad (see Bound et al. 2007).

The establishment of cultural institutes for the promotion of language and culture has been part of the political programs of European nations as well as the United States of America for quite some time. As early as 1883 the French created the Alliance Française to promulgate the French language. The British Council, originally called the “British Committee for Relations with Other Countries,” was founded in 1934. Other cultural institutions accompanied the new orientations in the post war situation. In 1953, the United States Information Agency became the official medium of public diplomacy under the auspices of the US Department of State, influential in shaping the public perception of the United States particularly in Europe. While France, England, and the United States coined national designations for their agencies, Germany, Spain, and Portugal resorted to their major poets to name their cultural institutes. The Goethe Institute, following on the former German Academy, started work in 1952 with the original intention to train teachers of German abroad. Spain’s Instituto Cervantes and Portugal’s Instituto Camões joined in 1991 and 1992. In 2007, the European Union National Institutes for Culture was founded, in which all cultural agencies of the European nations are represented.

In view of the long tradition and the eminent status of Confucius and Confucianism, reestablished in the Opening up and Reform period, it was a wise decision to use the name of the transcultural and transnational figure of Confucius for the new cultural institutes of China. Zhang and Schwartz quote Gu Mu, member of the State Council of the People’s Republic and nominal head of the Confucius Foundation, to document the philosopher’s official reinstatement in public life. “[I]n his speech to the first meeting of the International Confucian Association on the 2,545th anniversary of Confucius’s birth [Gu Fu] gave expression to the present ‘Confucianism Craze’ … by announcing that Confucius remains not only the Great Presence of China but will be China’s greatest gift to the world” (Zhang and Schwartz 1997, 207; see also Ching 1994, 37). In 2004, the People’s Republic of China started the establishment of Confucius Institutes with a pilot project in Tashkent, quickly followed by one in Seoul in the same year and in Stockholm in 2005, directed by the
prominent sinologist Torbjörn Lodén. More than 600 Confucius Institutes exist, most of them in the United States, 19 in Germany. The Chinese Ministry of Education, which finances these Institutes, hopes to raise the number to 1,000 by the year 2020. This is an important goal commensurate with the global role of the People’s Republic of China. To a certain extent, it recalls and links up with the prominent position of imperial China, which the Jesuits recognized during their missionary work and communicated to Europe and America in their translation of Confucius’s works in the seventeenth century. The model of virtuous education of individuals and leaders, provided by the Chinese philosopher of the fifth century BCE, served for the public leadership role of the Founding Fathers and the formation of the American republic in the eighteenth century and inspired the poetic and political career of Ezra Pound in the twentieth century. It can certainly also be the mission of the Confucius Institutes and become a guideline in our time. The Institutes are run and financed by the Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language. They often cooperate with local universities and enhance their Sinology departments. Occasional cultural or political differences between China and guest nations or partner universities are part of the process of cross-cultural negotiations, which informed the transcultural hermeneutics of the Jesuit Confucius translations. Such differences of opinions have accompanied the history of the cultural institutions of all nations, including temporary closure. At the same time, the history of cross-cultural relations also shows, that differences can always be resolved.

The implementation of the cultural diplomacy by way of Confucius Institutes ties in with President Xi Jinping’s new Silk Road initiative, the One Belt One Road project announced in 2013. The economic program of revitalizing the Chinese trade routes on land and sea, which started in the Han Dynasty (141 BCE) and flourished in the Tang Dynasty (7th–9th century), also enhances transcultural exchange and communication. The common denominator of the political initiative and the realization of Confucius Institutes is the creative use of the Chinese tradition. Ezra Pound’s engagement with Chinese civilization and Confucius brought about a poetic renewal of modern literature and led him to discover the role of Confucius for the European Enlightenment and for the Founding Fathers’ constitution of a new nation. This link between Chinese ideas and the social and moral renewal of nations set in motion further cross-cultural exchanges. R. John Williams points to the example of the Misty Poets, a group of “post-Cultural Revolution Chinese poets who turned to Pound as a radical model for their creation of a new transnational literary tradition” and cites Hong Huang’s “manifesto” in which “he turns … to Ezra Pound’s vision of the Chinese written character as a model for the new Chinese poetry” (Williams 2009, 156–157). Marion Hourdequin starts her comparative analysis of Confucius’s Analects and the co-authored study of American sociologists Robert N. Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (1985), with a reference to a lack of moral groundings of existing governments. From Confucius she learns that “the development of a good society begins with the cultivation of the individual virtue. … Through study and ritual practice, the individual brings himself into harmony. Through virtuous engagement with others, the individual brings harmony to social life” (Hourdequin 2010, 371). A similar attention to tradition is necessary for social reform and the renewal of life. “Both the Analects and Habits of the Heart view tradition as essential to maintaining the moral fabric of society” (Hourdequin 2010, 383). Confucius and his advancement of the moral constitution of humankind and of the moral basis of statecraft could serve as ideal transcultural links and promote transnational efforts to “Make it New” based on traditions.
Notes

1 Pound might also have come across this passage in reading Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, in which the transcendentalist writer included a total of nine passages, among them the reference to “Make It New” from his reading of Guillaume Pauthier’s translations of Confucius, which he translated into English rather than using any of the existing English translations in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s library (Thoreau 1971, 88). In “Quotations from the Confucian Books in *Walden*,” Lyman V. Cady stresses the political reading of this scene and the Confucian idea that rulers have a “mandate of Heaven” and can be replaced if they misuse their power (Cady 1961, 25). See also Hongbo Tan (1993).

2 Translation from the Chinese original by Zheng Chunguang (PhD, Peking University). It differs from the English translation by James Legge: “Heaven hears and sees as our people hear and see; Heaven brightly approves and displays its terrors as our people brightly approve and would awe” (Mueller 1899, 56).

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