Irving Babbitt’s Neo-humanism and Eastern Thoughts [1]

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中文摘要：白璧德毕其一生构建新人文主义以对抗 19 世纪末至 20 世纪初的道德败落、扩张情绪高涨的倾向。由于没能从当时盛行的文学、哲学思想中寻找到“真理”，他转而诉诸于古希腊人文思想和东方佛教和儒家思想。本文通过分析白氏所处的历史、文化情境辅以对其著作的细读，精练地展示了新人文主义的思想谱系，并在此基础上分析了新人文主义与东方思想的内在联系及其对当前战乱四起、危机四伏的世界中知识分子所肩负的责任和义务的启示。

As a Harvard comparative literature professor, literary scholar and cultural thinker, Irving Babbitt will always stand as a “Warring Buddha” in the American literary history. He led an intellectual movement called American humanism or Neo-humanism, which arose from his drastic dissatisfaction with the modern age and he strived against the dominating ideas of his age to reconstruct humanistic principles for modern life. As he later admitted, “Fighting a whole generation is not exactly a happy task.” In Seaton’s words, Babbitt is more like “a voice crying in the wilderness, a lonely prophet attempting the impossible task of reversing the course of history.”[2] Nonetheless, his pursuit of high moral purpose and values still finds echoes today: Andrew Hadfield, Dominic Rainford, Tim Woods’ declaration of “Literature and the Return to Ethics” (1999), Terry Eagleton’s rethinking of “Morality” (2003) and Edward W. Said’s rewriting Humanism and Democratic Criticism (2004).[3] Hence, it is of great significance to reexplore the intellectual genealogy of Babbitt’s neo-humanism and its correlation with classical eastern thoughts.

Babbitt believed that “he lived in a world where undisciplined and expansive emotions was running riot.” He termed this type moral sensibility as sentimental
humanitarianism (naturalism), which was a form of insidious self-flattery, pleasing to the bearer but based on concealment of man’s real moral predication and he argued that it is the humane tradition and discipline which keep us civilized and maintain a decent civil social framework. Although Babbitt never embraced any particular religion, he endorsed and adopted the essence of some which is common to great moral and religious systems. This special adoption across ages and cultures frames the foundation of his Neo-humanism. (See the tree diagram of the intellectual genealogy of Babbitt’s Neo-humanism below.)

The critique of Rousseau and Bacon’s humanitarianism (naturalism) and Taoism

Branch

Neo-humanism Trunk Humanistic Tradition

Branch

Humanistic level: Aristotle footnoting Confucius

Religious level: Jesus supplementing Buddha

The relevance of Emerson and Arnold’s modern spirit and the influence of his family

This diagram illustrates a brief structure of Babbitt’s ideas. As he once claimed in Rousseau and Romanticism:

I myself am fond of distinguishing three levels on which a man may experience life — the naturalistic, the humanistic and the religious. Tested by its fruits Buddhism at its best confirms Christianity. Submitted to the same test Confucianism falls in with the teaching of Aristotle and in general with that of all those who from the Greeks down have claimed decorum and the law of measure. This is so obviously true that Confucius has been called the Aristotle of the East. Not only has the Far East had in Buddhism a great religious movement and in Confucianism a great humanistic movement, it has also had in Daoism a movement that in its attempts to work out naturalistic equivalents of humanistic or religious insight, offers almost startling analogues to the movement I am here studying. (1991, p.lxxix)

Nevertheless, most of the western and Chinese studies of Babbitt concerning this subject are based on imaginative and ideological preoccupation rather than cultural and close textual analysis. As Liu Xie’s famous saying goes, “Each shed light on some corner but few examined the great high road” (各照隅隅，鲜观衢路) (Stephen Owen, 309)—the western focus on their own heritage, while the Chinese overstate their influence. Thus, to draw a crystallized conclusion needs attention to
Babbitt's accommodation of his multicultural data and our own objective judgment correspondingly.

Babbitt's acceptance and sublation of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism are inevitably confined by his scope of knowledge and filtered by his purposeful strategy of cultural reconstruction of American national identity. In his first three books _Literature and American College_ (1908), _The New Laocoon_ (1910) and _The Masters of Modern French Criticism_ (1912), Babbitt defines and defends the classical discipline of _humanitas_, examines at greater length the weaknesses and dangers of modern conceptions of art and develops Babbitt's critical standards and applies them in assessments of leading French literary critics and aestheticians mainly in the nineteenth century respectively, but he employs nothing from doctrines of Confucius, which proves his deficiency of classical Chinese philosophy at the moment. Babbitt's using Buddhism as a support to his criticism, however, permeates all of his works (1908-1940). He is frank about this:

I should perhaps say that in the case of Buddha I have been able to consult the original Pāli documents. In the case of Confucius and the Chinese I have had to depend on translations (RR. lxxix).

In effect, Babbitt already knew the rudiments of Sanskrit when he was still a sophomore at Harvard and began to recognize Buddha's "moral grandeur" and to admire India's saints for a will that carried then unharmed through physical torment. In 1891, he studied Sanskrit and Pāli under the Orientalist Sylvain Lévi at Ecole des Hautes Etudes and read independently in the early Buddhist texts. The next year he returned to Harvard for his M. A. and continued to learn Sanskrit with Paul Elmer More in Harvard's Orientalist Charles R. Lanman's advanced Sanskrit class. On one of his letters to Lamman, Babbitt said that "My interest in Sanskrit connects itself with Comparative Literature and Comparative Religion, rather than with Comparative Philology. I may not decide to make it my specialty, properly speaking, I shall in any case continue the study until I gain a considerable familiarity with the classical Sanskrit on the one hand, and with Pāli and the Buddhist records on the other."[^6] Actually, Babbitt achieved more than that—he translated _Dhammapada_ from Pāli and wrote an essay on Buddha and the Occident during his last few years.

Babbitt's own continuous and systematic discussions on the relationship between neo-humanism and other belief systems converge mainly within his original
introductions to *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919) and *Democracy and Leadership* (1924) and “Buddha and The Occident” in *Dhammapada* (1936). In the first introduction, Babbitt re-quoted Emerson’s poem:

There are two laws discrete  
Not reconciled, —  
Law for man, and law for thing;  
The last builds town and fleet,  
But it runs wild,  
And doth the man unking. (RR. lxx)

He held the idea that one should not only welcome the efforts of the man of science at his best to put the natural law on a positive and critical basis, but that one should strive to emulate him in one’s dealings with the human law, and so becomes complete positivist. It is this complete positivist that makes Babbitt’s neo-humanism totally different from classical humanism and thoroughly modern. To be modern and humanistic is not only to be positive and critical, however, but to be individualistic. If one is to be a sound individualist, an individualist with human standards, one must grapple with what Plato terms the problem of the One and the Many. Pertaining to the three facets of neo-humanism, Babbitt concluded that Confucius indeed, though a moral realist, can scarcely be called a positivist; Buddha on the other hand is an individualist for he wishes men to rest their belief neither on his authority nor on that of tradition. Babbitt acknowledged that he was indebted to the great Hindu positivist: “My treatment of the One and the Many, for example, is nearer to Buddha than to Plato” (RR. lxxx). Aristotle, author of *Nicomachean Ethics, Politics and Poetics*, Babbitt argued, is a positive and critical humanist—by his emphasis on the mediatory virtues he reminds one of Confucius, by his positive method and intensely analytical temper he reminds one rather of Buddha. It was in this sense he aspired to be called an Aristotelian. To be more exact, the most fundamental elements of Babbitt’s neo-humanism are Greek. Confucianism and Buddhism are but necessary and helpful supplements and further interpretations to them. In all Babbitt’s works, expressions and quotations about Confucianism appeared 30 times and that of Buddhism 113 times, thus, we could safely judge the weights they put on neo-humanism.
In “Chinese Primitivism,” the Appendix to Rousseau and Romanticism, Babbitt expressed his understanding about Taoism. He believed the closest approach in the past to the movement, which Rousseau is the most important single figure is the early Taoist movement in China and the general spirit of the Tao Te King of Lao-tzū is that of Wordsworth—a “wise passiveness.” He further explained that it is in Chuang-tzū that the doctrine develops its full naturalistic and primitivistic implications and few writers in East and West have set forth more entertainingly what one may term the Bohemian attitude towards life. Babbitt also recognized that Taoists were richly imaginative but along romantic lines, from which we should note the Taoist influence upon Li Po and other Bohemian and bibulous poets of the Tang dynasty, or the relationship of Taoism to the rise of a great school of landscape painting at about the same time. For this, Babbitt blamed the Confucians for not being able to work out a sound conception of the role of imagination—the universal key to human nature, which is perhaps the reason why China failed to achieve a great ethical art like that of the drama and the epic of the Occident at their best. Moreover, Babbitt pointed out that “though Lao-tzū proclaims that the soft is superior to the hard, doctrine that should appeal to the Occidental sentimentalist, one does not find in him or in the other Taoists the equivalent of the extreme emotional expansiveness of the Rousseauist. There are passages, especially in Lao-tzū, that in their emphasis on concentration and calm are in line with the ordinary wisdom of the East; and even where the doctrine is unmistakably primitivistic the emotional quality is often different from that of the corresponding movement in the West”(RR. 395-398).

Babbitt’s interpretation of Taoism, to some extent, touched its core; nevertheless, it failed to grasp Taoism as a whole, and to put it back into its original cultural context to make a sound judgment. Essentially, all the philosophers of ancient China addressed themselves to the same problem: how is man to live in a world dominated by chaos, suffering and absurdity? (Burton Watson, 3) Chuang-tzū and Confucius are both concerned about human condition and neither of them shares the western tenet of “l’art pour l’art” but Chinese “l’art pour la vie,” only because they have initiated two different lives, their arts appeared to be of different formations (Xu Fuguan, 80).

It is no surprise that Babbitt’s treatment of the whole naturalistic trend would be charged to be negative, extreme and one-sided for his doctrine was against a wide
variety of influential intellectuals and literary figures of his age, including Edmund Wilson, H. L. Mencken, John Dewey, Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, R. P. Blackmur, Arthur Lovejoy, J. E. Spingarn, Allen Tate and Jaques Barzun. Babbitt’s response to these charges is strikingly impressive—as to the charge of his treatment being one-sided, he said it was not only one-sided, but one-sided to the last degree for what the naturalists had neglected is not something that is on the fringe or outer rim of human experience, but something that is very central and there is a humanistic intention even in the one-sidedness; as to the charge of being negative, he is not in the least apologetic for the type of criticism that prevailed about the beginning of the nineteenth century proposed to substitute the “fruitful criticism of beauties for the barren criticism of faults”; as to the charge of being extreme, he explained that the essence of humanism is moderation, but a man’s moderation is measured by his success in mediating between some sound general principle and the infinitely various and shifting circumstances of actual life (DL, 44-46).

Since he was unable to discover truths in any form in the philosophies then fashionable, he has been led to prefer to the wisdom of the age the wisdom of the ages (DL, 48). In order to counteract the decline of ethic and the degradation of morality in America, Babbitt employed negative and even extreme means to balance his contemporary extreme trends. And he is not alone in doing this—today’s leading scholar Terry Eagleton collected a bunch of words like “losses and gains,” “truth virtue and objectivity” and “morality” his After theory to set his argument against the extreme tendency of the contemporary cultural studies; while Said, in his last completed book Humanism and Democratic Criticism, claims that “the real subject of this book is not humanism tout court...but rather humanism and critical practice, humanism as it informs what one does as an intellectual and scholar-teacher of the humanities in today’s turbulent world, which is now brimming over with belligerency, actual wars, and all kinds of terrorism”(2). George A. Panichas once wrote in his The Critical Legacy of Irving Babbitt: An Appreciation that “more and more I came to see him as our contemporary—one who ventures into the public square to wrestle strenuously with problems of life, literature and thought. He spoke, in short, to our condition” (1-2). No wonder why Babbitt argued that “the true difficulty with our young radicals is not they are too modern but that they are not modern enough” (RR. lxxi). And that’s why Babbitt resorted to Christianity,
Aristotelianism, Buddhism and Confucianism for help to solve the problem of his age and considered it legitimate.

Symbols (for Works of Irving Babbitt)
BC: *On Being Creative and Other Essays*
DL: *Democracy and Leadership*
DP: *The Dhammapada*
LC: *Literature and the American College*
MC: *The Masters of Modern French Criticism*
NL: *The New Laokoon*
RR: *Rousseau and Romanticism*
SC: *Spanish Character*

Notes:
[1] The reason why I choose the term “Eastern” instead of “Oriental” is that “the Orient” has been used in a derogatory sense since the publication of Said’s *Orientalism*. Babbitt himself holds that neither the romanticist nor the pure rationalist is qualified to grasp what is specifically Oriental in the Orient for the romanticist seeks in the East the element of strangeness and wonder and his interest is in differences rather than in identities, thus, this form of Orientalism has amounted chiefly in practice to the pursuit of picturesqueness and local color (DP, 74).
[2] James Seaton. “Irving Babbitt and Cultural Renewal” in *Humanitas* (1066-7210), Vol.16, Issue 1, 2003, p.4.
[3] Although the above distinguished contemporary leading scholars as Eagleton and Said may not share Babbitt’s demarcation of humanism, it’s no doubt that they all attempted to promote some sort of counter-balance in their turbulent world.
[4] Russell Kirk. “Foreword” in Irving Babbit. *Democracy and Leadership*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979, p.16.
[5] The western attitude are exemplified by Thomas R. Nevin’s *Irving Babbitt: An Intellectual Study* and George A. Panichas’s *The Critical Legacy of Irving Babbitt: An Appreciation*, while the Chinese one could be traced back to the views of Hou Jian and Yue Daiyuan who proclaim that Babbitt’s Neo-humanism are derived from the ideas of *Book of Changes* and Confucius.
[6] See Stephen C. Brennan and Stephen R. Yarbrough. *Irving Babbitt*. Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1987, pp.12-17.

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