Tendency of Confucian Thought in Emily Dickinson’s Poems

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Emily Dickinson’s poems embody both Confucianism and Daoism. Dickinson’s poems express attachment to earthly life and to family and friends; the poetess ponders over war from a unique viewpoint and she pays attention to the development of industry and technology in her poetry; many readers think Dickinson despises fame and fortune, however, some of her poems are full of dialectical thinking about fame and fortune. All these accord with Confucian thought which attaches importance to family and human relations and social affairs. Basing on some selected poetic texts, the tendency of Confucian thought in Emily Dickinson’s poems will be expounded in this paper.

Keywords: family and human relations, civil war and social development, dialectic thinking of fame and wealth

Emily Dickinson has written a lot of poetry on nature; Dickinson later chooses to live a reclusive life in her late life; such a good poet publishes only seven works before her death. When the author and readers read Dickinson poetry, they are more likely to see Taoist ideas in Dickinson’s poetry, for instance, love for nature, being a hermit, indifferent to fame and wealth etc. However, when the author reads Dickinson’s poems over and over again, the author finds that Dickinson’s poems are a contradictory unity. Her poems not only reflect the Taoist thought, but also reflect the trend of Confucian thought, such as attachment to family and friends, attention to social development, thinking about civil war, and dialectical and rational thinking about the contradiction and unity of fame and wealth. Taoist thought, like a wall screen, delicately blocks the connotation of Confucian thought in Dickinson’s poetry. If we don’t read Dickinson’s poetry thoroughly, the tendency of Confucian thought in Dickinson’s poetry is easy to be ignored.

“… For economic reasons, generations of family members have to live together. Thus the Chinese family system is developed, …” (Feng, 2013, p. 21). Confucianism pays attention to benevolence, righteousness, manners, wisdom, credit, loyalty, filial piety and so on. These are the principles of human-to-human relations in the family or among friends and among all people according to the above notes. Most of the Confucian theories are about the rationality of the family system, at least indicating that the family plays an important role in Confucianism. The author doesn’t want to discuss the concrete connotation of Confucianism here, but I only associate the importance of family in Confucianism with the emphasis on family and dependence on family in Dickinson’s poetry, and try to discuss the tendency of Confucianism in Dickinson’s poetry. Emily Dickinson was

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unmarried, lived in her father’s and brother’s house and did the housework. She valued the relationship between family and friends very much. Although her father was often a little anxious and gave the family a tense atmosphere, her father was very kind to her brother and sisters. It is said that many of Dickinson’s poems are written to her sister-in-law Susan. Generally speaking, Dickinson lives in a loving and warm family and her family are willing to love and help her. Therefore, it is not difficult to explain the value of family, affection and friendship displayed in Dickinson’s poems. Dickinson lived in the upsurge of religious revival, but she never converted to religion for the sake of faith and heaven. Instead, she paid more attention to family and friendship, and more to the earth than to heaven. Although it is not totally the same with the Confucian family in China, but the attachment to family and friends is similar. “There is another philosophy that focuses on human relations and world affairs in society” (Feng, 2013, p. 7). “Confucianism believes that dealing with daily human affairs is not an extraordinary thing for saints” (Feng, 2013, p. 9). From the above two notes, we can see that Confucianism pays attention to daily human relations and family affairs. The concept of human relations and family affairs in Confucianism may be very broad, but the family is also a kind of human relations and family affairs. The author thinks that Dickinson pays attention to family and friends, and to the human relations on earth; she thinks about civil war in poetry and she pays attention to social development such as the rise of railway and train; Dickinson dialectically thinks about fame and wealth and Dickinson has some poems devoted to fame and wealth; Dickinson not only pays attention to fame, but also has a very deep dialectical thinking about fame and fortune. American poet Dickinson went through the Civil War, in which she mourned the dead and thought about the war and the nature of the world. Dickinson is not indifferent to fame and wealth and she meditates on fame and wealth from the dialectical viewpoint. Dickinson is not a recluse without asking the world. Under the cover of seclusion, she thinks about the world in a dialectic way. Dickinson is concerned about human relations, about the development of the outside world and deeply analyzes the worldly affairs of fame and wealth. Dickinson’s poetry has similarities with Chinese Confucianism and Dickinson’s poetry does have a tendency of Confucianism. The author will choose some poetry texts as examples to demonstrate the tendency of attachment to family and friends in Dickinson’s poetry. The selected poems in this paper are from Johnson’s *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, and the Chinese translations are all quoted from Mr. Pu Long’s translation of Dickinson’s complete works.

I. Attachment to the Earthly World

The Confucian thought in China pays attention to the family ethics relationship, and the family is very important to a person’s growth. The American poetess Dickinson also shows the love and attachment to the family and the relatives and friends in her poems and the family affection is the typical human relations in this earthly world. She had not converted to the religion and chose to be herself. She always questioned and contradicted religion, and some of her poems have repeatedly pondered the heaven of faith and the earthly home in which she lives. Most of these poems express deep attachment to earthly life and family and friends, and also reveal doubts about heaven. The contrast between the heaven and the earth she used in her poems highlights the warmth of her family members’ accompany and strengthens her attachment to human emotions. From this perspective the family is undoubtedly important to her, which coincides with the Confucian emphasis on the family. Because of the different cultural backgrounds of Chinese Confucianism and Dickinson’s poetry, the
concrete connotations of Confucian family is not totally the same as that of Dickinson’s family, but it is common that both recognize the importance of family. The author will take several poetry texts as examples to illustrate this viewpoint.

The Height in Heaven comforts not-
Their Glory-nought to me-
’Twas best imperfect-as it was-
I’m finite-I can’t see-

The House of Supposition-
The Glimmering Frontier that
Skirts the Acres of Perhaps
To Me-shows insecure-

The Wealth I had-contented me-
If ‘twas a meaner size-
Then I had counted it until
It pleased my narrow Eyes-

Better than larger values-
That show however true-
This timid life of Evidence
Keeps pleading- “I don’t know.” (Dickinson, 1960, p. 342)

Poem 696 can be interpreted as the satisfaction of earthly life. The first and second verses of the poem mainly tell readers that even though the heaven has glory and the height, “I” regard these nothing. Heaven is not perfect and can not give me comfort. Although “hypothetical building” is shining, it is too illusory, “very unsafe” to me. The first two sections of the poem describe heaven: “I” do not care about heaven and heaven can not bring “me” security. In contrast to the first two verses, the third and fourth verses of the poem express my satisfaction with the existing wealth, which is shown by comparing the earthly wealth with heaven. Although the amount of wealth is small, but precious and true, the earthly happiness is of great value to “me”. Maybe the earthly wealth is insignificant relative to the edifice and glory of heaven, which are very beautiful and seductive, but perhaps that is illusory. The earthly life that “I” now possess and enjoy is concrete and real, and the possession of reality is, after all, better than the distant heaven. In a word, “I” am satisfied with the life that I have now, and the living conditions on the earth make “me” happy. Poem 696 narrates with the first person “I” as if I had this experience in person, and the first person narration often makes readers believe what happens in the poem is true. This poem expresses the satisfaction of the earthly life by using the contrast technique, which coincides with the Confucian view of family and world affairs. Because of the different cultural background, the earthly family in Dickinson’s poetry is compared with the paradise in religion; the family in Chinese Confucianism emphasizes the relationship between family members, such as filial piety, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and credit. Although the specific connotations are not totally the same in Dickinson’s poetry and Confucianism, but both deem that family is important.

In thy long Paradise of Light
No moment will there be
When I shall long for Earthly Play
And mortal Company- (Dickinson, 1960, p. 512)

This is a short poem and there are only four sentences. The first two sentences describe heaven and the last two sentences describe the earthly world. The contrast technique is usually to highlight one of the two aspects, and the poem clearly expresses the attachment to the earthly world and love for human companionship. The poem also clearly states that “I” do not like heaven “moment”, “I” only love the earthly human companionship and the most important human companionship comes from family companionship. Both 1145 and 696 poems use the contrast technique, and through the contrast between the heaven and the earthly family companion, the family importance is expressed. Poem 696 are full and detailed, while Poem 1145 is concise and condensed. Whether simple or full-bodied, the two poems are both intended to emphasize the importance of earthly life and family, again in line with the Confucian focus on the family.

To own a Susan of my own
Is of itself a Bliss-
Whatever Realm I forfeit, Lord,
Continue me in this! (Dickinson, 1960, p. 600)

The relationship between family members in Confucianism is coordinated according to the Confucian principles of filial piety, benevolence, righteousness, manners, wisdom and credit. The attachment to friends, relatives and family members’ companionship in Dickinson’s poems has similarity with family relationship in Confucianism. Susan is a friend of “mine”, and the kingdom of heaven, and the Lord is nothing compared to this friend. As long as there are relatives and friends , “itself is a blessing.” The three poems-696, 1145 and 1401 all use the same contrastive technique to compare heaven with earthly life and draw the same conclusion: the companionship of earthly family is far better than the beauty of heaven, and “I” would rather choose the companionship of earthly family. These three poems together prove that family and friends, human companionship and earthly wealth can give “me” love, companionship and blessing, and these precious wealth are better than the glory of heaven, height and kingdom. The family is made up of family members, who accompany each other and care for each other. Family members are the closest partners in the world. The three poems-696, 1145 and 1401 are all narrated with the first person singular “I”. The first person seems to be the poet herself as if “I” had this experience in person, and the first person narration often makes readers believe what happens in the poem is true. Therefore, these three poems highlight the importance of the family through the first person and contrast, which is very similar to the Confucian idea of focusing on the family.

II. Focus on War and Industrial Development

“Confucianism believes that dealing with daily human affairs is not an extraordinary thing for saints” (Feng, 2013, p. 9). This note indicates that all people are concerned about family affection and human affairs because they are family members and society members. In the first part the author discussed the emphasis on family affection in Dickinson’s poems, which is part of the social affairs. And the war and the development of social industry are also part of the social affairs. Dickinson not only pays attention to war and social development, but also dialectically thinks about fame and wealth. So Dickinson is not a recluse who does not concern about the social affairs. The American Civil War is one big event in her life and most people think that she didn’t pay attention to the war and just hid in her room. In fact, by reading Dickinson’s poems, it can be found that she pays
attention to war, industrial development and all living things on the earth. The author will take three poetry texts as examples to expound this view.

When I was small, a Woman died-
Today-her Only Boy
Went up from the Potomac-
His face all Victory

To look at her-How slowly
The Seasons must have turned
Till Bullets clipt an Angle
And He passed quickly round-

If pride shall be in Paradise-
Ourself cannot decide-
Of their imperial Conduct-
No person testified-

But, proud in Apparition-
That Woman and her Boy
Pass back and forth, before my Brain
As eve in the sky-

I’m confident that Bravoes-
Perpetual break abroad
For Braveries, remote as this
In Scarlet Maryland- (Dickinson, 1960, p. 292)

According to notes on page 85 of the second volume of *Complete Works of Dickinson’s Poems* translated by Pulong, “On October 21, 1861, Francis H. Dickinson, who served in the 15th regiment F company, was killed in the Battle of Ball’s Bluff. He is said to be the first of the Amherst quota soldiers to die for his country.” Poem 596 mourns the warriors who died in this war. The first verse begins with the mother of the warrior, whose mother has passed away years ago, and now her son, the warrior, who was killed at Ball’s Bluff, on the Potomac River, has died for his country, so “His face all Victory”. The second stanza describes bullets, reminiscent of the battlefield, reminiscent of death. They are both dead. The key words of the third section are “pride” and “imperial”, and the poem narrator does not directly affirm and praise the warrior, but uses a roundabout way. “We” can not decide whether he is proud in heaven or can not prove whether his behavior is noble, but such a semi-conformative sentence makes people feel that the brave warrior deserves the praise and it is a “noble performance” and also a kind of pride in Heaven. The fourth section no longer indirectly praises the warrior, but affirmed the praise of the warrior in a direct and resolute way. In order to avoid repetition of words, the adjective “proud” is used here because pride is used in the third stanza. “I” constantly think of the warrior and his mother. They are worthy of pride and they will be praised in heaven. The last stanza tells the reader that the death location of the warrior’s sacrifice is at the border of Maryland, so it is called “Scarlet Maryland” The last stanza celebrates the bravery of the warrior again and they will be forever mourned and honored, regardless of time and place, everywhere and permanently. The words at the end of the poem are enthusiastic, direct and exciting, and the use of the words “everywhere” and “long” emphasizes the praise of the warrior everywhere and forever. The third, fourth and fifth
sections are all about the praise of the brave and the praises are from indirect to direct stanza by stanza. From the implicit, semi-confirmed praise in the third section, to the direct affirmative praise in the fourth section, to the intense and rich praise in the fifth section, the praise for the brave is expressed gradually. Dickinson was born in 1830 and died in 1886. The Civil War was from 1861 to 1865. Dickinson was about 30 when the Civil War broke out. In 1862 Dickinson created many poems and some of them are about the Civil War. Dickinson was thinking about wars in her poems and the theme of war is not ignored by Dickinson. Dickinson was concerned about social affairs and expressed her ideas through her poems.

There’s the Battle of Burgoyne-
Over, every Day,
By the Time that Man and Beast
Put their work away
“Sunset” sounds majestic-
But that solemn War
Could you comprehend it
You would chastened stare- (Dickinson, 1960, p. 522)

The theme of Poem 1174 is about war. According to the notes on page 425 of volume 2 of *Complete Works of Dickinson’s Poetry* translated by Pulong, Burgoyne in the first line is an English general, who was surrendered by the American soldiers and surrendered in Saratoga Campaign. The narrator of poetry takes Burgoyne as the beginning sentence of poetry to show the existence and truth of war. The battle is the work between human beings and the beast in the third line and it is ironic. War itself is the disaster and people will suffer from it. This poem thinks deeply about the war and shows disagreement on wars. Poem 596 praises the warrior who died for the country in the war and they will also be praised in Heaven. Poem 1174 thinks about the nature and effect of war. The two poems show Dickinson’s concern about the war and the nature of human beings; they also show her love and concern for the people. Her concern for wars and love for people are humanitarian spirit, which indicates that she pays attention to social affairs.

Dickinson lived in the 19th century, and at that time industry developed rapidly, so Dickinson paid attention to the development of this society besides the great event of civil war, especially the rapid development of industry. Railways and trains were also symbols of industrial development. Poem 585 describes the new things-railways and trains, which is Dickinson’s concern for the development of “world affairs” in Confucianism.

I like to see it lap the Miles-
And lick the Valleys up-
And stop to feed itself at Tanks-
And then- prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains-
And supercilious peer
In Shanties-by the sides of Roads-
And then a Quarry pare

To fit its sides
And crawl between
Complaining all the while
In horrid-hooting stanza-
Then chase itself down Hill-
And neigh like Boanerges-
Then-prompter than a Star
Stop-docile and omnipotent
At its own stable door- (Dickinson, 1960, p. 286)

Poem 585 is about trains, which were a new product of industrial development. In this poem, the train is likened to a horse and man. This poem uses the personification and the defamiliarization skill and the train is depicted vividly and interestingly. If the reader does not read the complete poem, the reader can not even guess this is about the train. The first stanza uses both personification. The walking of a train is likened to licking a river valley. The word “licking” is used as if readers can visualize the train moving quickly along the track, and the train stops temporarily as if it were a horse to rest and drink water. The second stanza describes the train crossing the mountains and rushing over the hut by the roadside. Here the train is compared to a person, and he “supercilious peer/ In Shanties”. The fast speed of the train and the roadside still shanties forms a contrast. The rapid passing of the train is just like a peer and this vivid description of the speed and arrogance of the train make people smile. In the third stanza, “And then a Quarry pare” and “climb”, the word “pare” shows the arrogance and the speed of the train. The flute of the train was like a man’s “complaint”, and the angry train finally rushed down the mountain with a long hoarseness of a horse and arrived on time. The term “omnipotent” is used to describe people’s perception of the function of a train when it comes to people. In the final section, the train is compared to a horse and the railway station is compared to a stable. The tired horse will eventually stop in front of their own house and have a good rest. Train is the product of industrial development and an important part of American industrial development. So Dickinson is not isolated from the world and she was concerned about the development of the society and the world by using her poetry.

III. Dialectical Thinking of Fame and Wealth

Many of Dickinson’s poems express the idea of being indifference to fame and fortune, disdaining wealth and fame and fortune. Later in her life Dickinson lives in a seclusive life in white. All these fully reflect the Taoist thought in Dickinson’s life and Dickinson’s poems. But Dickinson’s poetry is a combination of contradictions, and a careful reading of Dickinson’s poetry shows that she herself also desires the poet’s reputation. “If fame belong to me, I can’t escape it.” She once said. From this sentence it can be seen that Dickinson does not refuse fame and she also longs for fame. Some of Dickinson’s poems have their own thinking about fame and wealth and she has dialectical thinking of fame and wealth from the philosophical and metaphysical level. Fame may last forever and fame may also be ephemeral and fleeting. Dickinson dialectically analyzes fame and wealth dialectically and the analyses are thorough and meaningful, profound and dialectical.

Fame is the tint that Scholars leave
Upon their Setting Names-
The Iris not of Occident
That disappears as comes- (Dickinson, 1960, p. 413)
There are only four sentences in Poem 866, but it is about dialectically thinking about fame and fortune. The first and second sentences define fame, which is a luster that is associated with falling names. Fallen scholars or people refer to persons who are over the heyday, or die. In any case, their names are no longer widely known, but fame will still exist. That the name is gone indicates that fame comes late. Although fame comes late, it lasts with the “lost name” forever. The third sentence and the fourth sentence use the rainbow as a metaphor, “The Iris not of Occident/That disappears as comes-”, and it is well known that the rainbow is beautiful but suddenly fleeting. Fame will not be like that rainbow and fame will last forever. This poem expresses the view that fame lasts forever. Fame and fortune is an unavoidable thing in life and it is worth thinking of how to look at fame and fortune.

A Death blow is a Life blow to Some
Who till they died, did not alive become-
Who had they lived, had died but when
They died, Vitality begun. (Dickinson, 1960, p. 397)

There are only four lines in Poem 816 and each line includes life or alive/vitality. This poem seems to be discussing life and death. Since Dickinson’s poems can be interpreted in many ways, I would like to interpret this poem from the perspective of fame and benefit. The first two sentences of the poem say that some people are alive only after death, and the last two sentences of the poem say that living is equal to dying, and life is just beginning after death. If this assumption is used in the relationship between a poet or artist and fame, it also makes sense. For example, the poet, living unknown and poor, is just like a dead person, or life died in some way. Some poets or artists have gained fame after their death. Though they die, they are still alive. From the perspective of the influence of fame and fortune on artists, this poem is more like a dialectical thinking about fame and fortune.

Fame is a bee.
It has a song-
It has a sting-
Ah, too, it has a wing. (Dickinson, 1960, p. 713)

This poem has only four lines and is also an exploration of fame and fortune. Fame is likened to bees, which can hum and sing a song; bees have thorns that can sting; bees have wings that can fly. These three metaphors have their profound meanings. “A song” can be pleasant to hear and songs can be seen as a reputation can bring positive benefits; thorns will sting people and thorns can be interpreted as the bad aspects of fame. Wings can fly and flying is the rising movement which maybe mean social status improved, but flying wings can also quickly disappear and fame is an instant thing. From these three images, we can see that fame can bring both benefits and disadvantages. This is in line with the development rule of things, because everything has two sides. Through the image or metaphor of bees, this poem vividly develops a comprehensive and profound philosophical thinking on fame.

All men for Honor hardest work
But are not known to earn-
Paid after they have ceased to work
In Infamy or Urn- (Dickinson, 1960, p. 528)

There are only four lines in this poem, the subject of which is honor. The first two lines of the poem mean that everyone work hard for honor, but don’t know what to gain, which is a question most people in the world will
think about. The second two lines of the poem tell readers that the harvest or reward after struggle is usually “humiliating or coffin”. Humiliation can be interpreted as effort without reward or bad harvest; coffin refers to death. A person struggles hard, but in the end no honor or reputation has been received. Honor is not equal to working hard and this poem expresses the pessimistic view on fame and fortune.

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne’er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated-dying-
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear! (Dickinson, 1960, p. 35)

Poem 67 is on the theme of success and failure. This poem uses contrast techniques to dialectically think about the meanings of success and failure. The first sentence and the second sentence of the first stanza point out that the person who has not achieved success will think that success is an excellent thing. The third and fourth sentences of the first stanza compare success to “a nectar”. The person who has never succeeded can only pursue success with an urgent need, and the need is the motive force to pursue success. “the purple Host”, “Who took the Flag today” in the second stanza of the poem stand for the successful people and these people can not explain clearly the meaning of victory. The third stanza of the poem depicts the defeat that will die and the distant “The distant strains of triumph” which is loud but painful to the “forbidden” ears who have not experienced victory. People who have never been successful know that success is like “a nectar”, but the successful “the purple” do not know what victory means. This sharp contrast is a satire, a lament and a pity. This poem compares the winners with the losers, focusing more on the sorrow and pain of the losers. These poems are all about fame and fortune and the narrator of poetry shows pessimistic attitude towards fame and fortune. Dickinson’s thinking about fame and fortune is either profound, meaningful, dialectical, or comprehensive. Fame and fortune is an important indicator of secular life and it can be seen that Dickinson’s poetry is not divorced from the secular and these poems still pay attention to thinking about human relations.

Conclusion

Confucianism believes that dealing with human relations and social affairs is not an exception of sage and everyone needs to deal with human relations and social affairs. The concept of human relations and social affairs may have a wide meaning. The author chooses three aspects: family, social development and dialectical view of fame and fortune. These three aspects are used to demonstrate the Confucian tendency in Dickinson’s poetry. Dickinson’s poems compare heaven with earthly life to highlight the happiness of earthly family life and the company of relatives and friends; although she lived in her home as a hermit in the later period of her life, she still
concerned on the development of civil war and industry, thinking about the outside world in the form of poetry; Dickinson’s poems not only express the idea of being indifferent to fame and fortune and some poems also express dialectical thinking about fame and fortune. Poetry is also a way to pay attention to fame and fortune. To sum up, Dickinson’s poetry embodies the attachment to earthly life and family and friends; the poet pays attention to and ponders war with a unique perspective; the poet pays attention to the development of industry and technology in his poetry; all people think that Dickinson does not desire for fame and fortune, but her poetry has no lack of dialectical thinking about fame and fortune. The family, the war, the industry, the fame and fortune, and so on, all reflect the Confucianism’s emphasis on family and social affairs. Dickinson’s poetry is no lack of exploration of social affairs, such as focus on family relations, civil war, industrial development and dialectical thinking about fame and fortune. In conclusion Dickinson’s poems in some way reflect the tendency of Confucian thought.

References