

A Study of Taoism in Thoreau's *Walden*

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Abstract: *Walden* records the life and thoughts of the American writer Henry David Thoreau when he lived in Walden Pond by himself. Although Thoreau never mentions Taoism in *Walden*, this book always reflects his spiritual pursuit of Taoism. Thoreau and Taoists have the similar answers to the problems that human face in different era and different cultural backgrounds. This paper analyzes the Taoism in *Walden* from three aspects: return to nature, pursuit of simple life and social criticism, and points out that the similar philosophical basis between “Tao” and Transcendentalism accounts for the similarities between Thoreau and Taoist.

1. Introduction

Henry David Thoreau(1817-1862) is an American writer, philosopher, and a representative of transcendentalism. At his age, the economy developed quite fast and people started to feel the advantage the advanced material civilization brought, therefore the desire for better material pleasure rose gradually. People's growing needs can be satisfied in the commercial age and any faith or belief seemed so pale and meaningless. Under such circumstance, many scholars and thinkers began to wonder if such a society is what people are looking for and if money and material comfort are truly our hearts land. With such confusion, Thoreau moved to a wooden area near a lake and lived there all alone for two years and two months. During those two years, Thoreau earned his own living by building the house, planting for food and lived the original and simple life. He tried with his own efforts and experience to tell the world that people shouldn't addicted to the material life, but to find some time to explore the spiritual world. Themed with this experience, *Walden* was published in 1854. As a classic transcendental work, *Walden* was considered one of the most popular non-fictional works in American history.

In Thoreau's era, Chinese culture just appeared in the libraries of Europe and the United States. Thoreau is the first person to absorb Chinese culture. Chinese scholar Guo Jianliang points out the similarities between Thoreau and Taoism, fully showing that the philosopher is influenced by Taoist. When Thoreau was 21 years old, his diary reflected Chinese culture for the first time. And his passion for oriental wisdom increased with time. In 1843, his extract translation version of China's *The Four Books* appeared on the literary journal for the first time. His most popular works, *Walden*, uses a large number of references of traditional Chinese culture. Thoreau spent a lot of time reading traditional Chinese literature, and personally practiced to understand the spirit of these books. From 1845 to 1847, he lived in Walden. This seclusion life makes him understand the Chinese culture and the idea of the harmony between the nature and human more.

Walden quotes a lot of Confucianism, but its ideological essence is Taoism. When Chinese readers read Thoreau's *Walden*, they can not help thinking of Taoism in China. Like a Taoist hermit, Thoreau went into the forest of Walden Pond, and built a cottage by himself to make a description of nature. His maverick and rich spiritual connotation makes people feel that he is one from *Zhuang Zi* (a book which portrays many characters), or a Taoist belief pastoral poet. In *The Wisdom of Lao Zi*, Mr. Lin Yutang said: “Zhuang Zi's individualism and unyielding personality are similar with Thoreau's.”^[1] Thoreau's seclusion in Walden is not only a return to nature, but also a deep critique of life and an exploration of life. Similarly, while Taoist philosophy are promoting inner peace and spiritual detachment, it is more concerned with physical and psychological problems of individual existence. Although we have no conclusive evidence to prove that Thoreau comes into contact with

Lao Zi, Zhuang Zi or other Taoist writings, this does not prevent us from discussing Taoist implications in Thoreau's *Walden*, because this is a deep feeling for every reader.

2. Taoism in *Walden*

2.1 Return to Nature

Thoreau and Zhuang Zi are both lovers of nature. The first chapter of *Zhuang Zi* is entitled "*A Happy Excursion*" which means walking freely and easily in nature. This chapter describes a huge bird called roc: "its back is I do not know how many thousand li in breadth. When it is moved, it flies, its wings obscuring the sky like clouds."^[2] And there is similar description in *Walden*: "The migrating buffalo, which seeks new pastures in another latitude, is not extravagant like the cow which kicks over the pail, leaps the cow yard fence, and runs after her calf, in milking time."^[3]⁴⁷⁶ The only difference is that Zhuang Zi compares roc with cicadas and cooer, whereas Thoreau compares migrating buffalo with cow. But the basic ideas are exactly the same.

Thoreau advocates to integrate into the nature in his whole life, which is similar to the highest level of harmony between man and nature Taoism pursues. Taoism believes that "Tao" is paramount, inscrutable, but omnipresent. It is the origin of all things and fundamental force through which the boundless universe controls the development and change everything. Nature is actually the embodiment of "Tao." To respect nature is to respect "Tao." Thoreau also considers God and nature as one, insisting that the natural phenomena and the universe are the ubiquitous and supreme appearance of God. Thoreau and Taoists believe that people's mind will be purified, and the spirit will get temper and sublimation when coming into the nature. By combining with nature, human can overcome the stagnation of spirit, improve themselves, and obtain the ideal life. Thoreau believes that human and nature are harmonious and unified. Human is a part of nature, this idea is a response to the pursuit of harmony "between man and nature" in Taoism.

2.2 Pursuit of Simple Life

Taoism advocates "returning to innocence" because Taoist deeply feels that the problems of human society are caused by people's lust of foreign matter. Returning to innocence can help people resist the temptation of material and maintain peace of mind. Thoreau also clearly see that most people have a heavy and sad life, and the extreme pursuit of material leads to this situation. In Chapter One, Thoreau analyzes human's basic needs. First of all, he reduces the necessities of man to four kinds, that is, clothing, shelter, food, and fuel. "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one."^[3]¹⁸ Thoreau said: "I did not use tea, nor coffee, nor butter, nor milk, nor fish meat, and so did not have to work to get them."^[3]³⁰³ In his opinion, material poverty doesn't mean poverty in life. "It looks poorest when you are richest...Love your life, poor as it is...Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage...I do not see but a quiet mind may live as contentedly there, and have as cheering thoughts, as in a palace."^[3]⁴⁸² A wise man's life is characterized by the external simplicity and rich content. Savage's lifestyle is simple both inside and outside. "Once people inherited farms, houses, livestock and farm tools, they became the slaves of the land and were troubled by material life all day."^[3]¹²² People like that will feel "did not have lived."^[3]¹³⁷

Thoreau's life experiment proves that people can live a simple life with dignity. Capitalism overemphasizes material production, people can take a different path. In a year, he only spent 6 weeks to make a living, and the rest of the time for himself. Lao Zi regards the baby as a sign of "Tao." Baby is pure and peaceful, but is controlled by all kinds of material desires and they fall into a wrong path. A lot of people would pursue money, status and other worldly possessions as life goals. They always think that after obtaining something good, happiness would come down from heaven. Lao Zi clearly reveals the distress brought by human's possessions on materials. In his view, controlling materialism is not belittling life. Only the contempt of material interests is the real meaning of life.

2.3 Social Criticism

Thoreau and Taoists recollects and criticizes values and attitudes of their own times. At the same time, they explore the real life of human nature in their own unique way, seeking after desired condition of their lives. Thoreau and Taoist observe the progress of material civilization with a keen eye, arguing that this will bring the alienation of human nature. So they oppose the crazy pursuit of material benefits. In *Walden*, Thoreau reminds people constantly that they have been in a trance. They have been accustomed to the fixed mode of life and lose themselves in the industrial revolution. When seeking for success, they lose the honor of human being and the natural instinct. Under the stimulation of material interests, the desire to conquer nature not only makes people's own life begin to twist, but also causes unprecedented damage to nature. As the great ideological critics in Chinese history, Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi created a precedent of ancient Chinese critical philosophy. Human lose authenticity, health, happiness and freedom when they are in pursuit of fame. In response to this alienation, Zhuang Zi proposed to liberate man from the shackles of materialism. Faced with the dissimulatory life, Thoreau abandoned the American industrial society which he thought was noisy and desperate. He left alone and went to the lake and the forest to explore the real life of human nature. Although Thoreau's seclusion in *Walden* is to return to nature outwardly, actually it is the criticism of the society. Thoreau said: "nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary...I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life".^[3]¹³⁴ These are not the recluse language. In Thoreau's opinion, spiritual life is more rewarding than material life, people should strive for spiritual freedom. In the view of the human condition at that time, he puts forward the idea of simplifying the material life and pursuing the spiritual life as a way to solve human's predicament. Similarly, Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi's philosophy is essentially concerned with physical and psychological problems of individual existence. They both advocate the independence of personality, spiritual freedom, and pursuit of spiritual detachment and inner peace.

Besides, the common ground of Thoreau and Taoist thoughts is reflected in the criticism of the government. Lao Zi objects to the ruler's excessive use of the law to control the lives of the people, and thinks the best way to manage the country is "inaction". The so-called "inaction" of Lao Zi is not to do nothing, it is "do not play the gangster."^[4] The ruler should let everything takes its course, interfere people's lives and give orders as little as possible. In the book *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau describes the relationship between the government and the people. He insists that the government is merely a matter of expediency, a model for people to choose and to carry out their willing. Therefore, the government itself has no precedence over the sanctity of citizens. The government should protect the freedom of the individual citizens and should not interfere their behavior of choices. The government should do something beneficial to the people without interfering people. *Tao Te Ching* (a book written by Lao Zi) may be the first time that people protest against the over organized and automated life. Lao Zi suggests that a big country should be governed with the same care of frying a small fish. Thoreau's idea on the government coincides with Lao Zi's noninterference.

3. Conclusion

From those analysis above, we can see that Thoreau's thoughts are very close to Taoism. They both respect nature and oppose the the power of the rulers. They also advocate a simple life and the purification of the soul in nature. Thoreau never mentions Taoism in *Walden*. But by examining works and writers which have influenced Thoreau, we just infer that Thoreau probably know *Tao Te Ching*, in spite of the fact that there is no evidence proving that Thoreau knew *Zhuang Zi*. Without further evidence, we should not make a conclusion. However, for readers of *Walden*, there are so many similarities between Thoreau and Taoism. This is primarily because of the similar philosophical basis between "Tao" and transcendentalism.

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