

Taoism in *Walden*

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Abstract: Thoreau's masterpiece *Walden* reveals the meaning of human life. *Walden* presents plenty of eastern culture throughout the whole book. However, Taoism is the main ideology ran through the work. This paper attempts to present the connection between eastern culture--Taoism and Thoreau's ideology, and makes a better understanding of *Walden*. Through the comparison from the aspects of nature-view and spiritual pursuit and the attitude towards society, we would have a full comprehension of the similarity and differences between Taoism and thought of Thoreau. These two ideologies offer us a guideline in our lives.

Key words: Thoreau; Taoism; nature; spirit; Lao Tzu

1. Introduction

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was a writer, poet and philosopher in America in the nineteen century. Also, he was a leading transcendentalist. As one of the most influential writers in American literature, he devoted his entire life into observing and studying nature and wrote many literary works recording his ideas on human-nature relationship. His literary style interweaves close natural observation, personal experience, pointed rhetoric, symbolic meanings, and historical lore, while displaying a poetic sensibility, philosophical austerity, and "Yankee" love of practical detail. *Walden* was one of his remarkable works. It describes Thoreau's extremely simple life near the *Walden* pond. In *Walden*, Thoreau expressed his criticism towards the materialistic society and the popular desire of gain and power. Moreover, he gave an ode to the pursuit of noble spirit and showed great respect and passion to nature. In *Walden*, Thoreau emphasized that substance was the foundation for life, however, spirit was much more important. Contemplation and closeness to the nature is stressed in *Walden*. He believed that people lived a better life in the harmony of nature.

In the theory of traveling theory, which was put forward by Edward Said, it mentioned that the way of dissemination of theory is not moving directly from the starting-point to the acceptance-point. It should be divided into four stages: the beginning stage, the stage of "distance transversed", the stage of acceptance and the stage of changing and merging. The dissemination of culture is conformed to this theory. The dissemination of Chinese culture towards America in nineteen century belonged to the stage of acceptance. Edward Said held an opinion of orientalism that the image of eastern people was not the true eastern, and the oriental image was defined by the west. The birth of orient was out of the need of colonization and cultural control. In the process of acceptance, western people misinterpreted the eastern culture. The west could not fully realize and understand the true China and their views on China were one-sided. Researchers found out that even traces of Chinese culture are found throughout the whole *Walden*, western scholars barely admitted that Thoreau was influenced by the Chinese culture.

In recent years, Thoreau's statements towards human life have become the heating topic in American literature and philosophy. Yet, lots of problems remain unsolved in the study of Thoreau, such as the relationship between Thoreau and eastern culture. Throughout the whole work, we notice that Thoreau quoted a lot from Confucianism. People tend to agree with the influence of Confucianism towards Thoreau. However, the style and thought of *Walden* is similar

to Taoism. Famous scholar, Yutang Lin once pointed out that Thoreau and Chuang Tzu are alike in life's experience, character and the pursuit of individualism. Some remarkable beliefs, such as celebration of nature, heaven and man unite as one and Wu-wei in Taoism are similar to the ideology of Thoreau in *Walden*. It is amazing to find out that these two ideologies are so much alike to some extent through they were put forward in such different period. Taoism was originated from ancient China, while *Walden* was written in the nineteen century. Even no direct evidence proves that Thoreau was influenced by Taoist culture, it is still meaningful to compare and analyze these two distinct ideology. To sum up, it's obvious to find that researches in analyzing the connection between Chinese culture and Thoreau's thought in *Walden* become more and more rich. This essay is to make full understanding about how Chinese culture enter the door of the west and America, as well as offer a comparison between thoughts of Thoreau and Taoism in style, thoughts and content. By analyzing the Taoism in *Walden*, we would have a better understanding of eastern and western culture. With the rapid development of our modern civilization, our desire is burning in society. The further we go, the easier we lose ourselves. Through the analysis of Taoism in *Walden*, the author believes these two ideologies blending with each other would lead us step into a new path in our modern life.

2. Similar social background

2.1 Background information of Taoism

During the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC), there were many dukedoms under the king of the eastern Zhou Dynasty in ancient China. With the improvement of productive forces, the private ownership of land appeared and the well-field system was replaced. In polity, because of the long period of war, the old order of slavery was broken. The new landlord class was born and the scholar-bureaucrats rose. It was the greatest period for Chinese thought; different schools competed for ideological supremacy and political influence. Taoism was one of these schools. Unlike Confucianism, Taoism tends to be away from polity. Taoism advocated returning to the nature and pursuing inner peace instead of participating into political affairs. Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu were the leading retired scholars of Taoism. Taoists gave up seeking the way of reform of political structure and making the country rich and strong. They criticized the reality and tradition and retreated into the wooded hill, descended into human's soul, seeking freedom of our mind and spirit.

2.2 Social background of the nineteen century American

During nineteen century, industrial revolution developed rapidly in America. In the first half of the nineteenth Century, American is at the initial stage of transformation from the agricultural age to the industrial age. With the development of industrialization and capitalism, the economy of America developed rapidly and society was constantly improving. However, the vigorous development of the industrial and commercial society at that time caused widespread worship of golden calf and hedonism. Moreover, this social value stimulates people to pursue wealth and money without limit. In order to get more material wealth and live a better life, people were busy chasing money all the time. Wealth was the only goal of people's life. In order to achieve this goal, people flung caution to the winds. They exploited and occupied the limited natural resources excessively. With the process of land reclamation, at the same time, a large area of the forest disappeared. The roar of the machine can be heard everywhere, while the song of the birds were to be found nowhere. A series of environmental problems came into being for human's mistaken behavior: The forest coverage rate dropped suddenly, soil erosion was serious day by day, biodiversity decreased and so on. The natural ecology was in serious damage.

The great change of the society also promoted the reform of social thought. With the development of the industrialization, the social opinion towards human nature changed radically. People longed for freedom. Transcendentalism appeared on the scene. Transcendentalists stressed that freedom and rationality were the most important for human being. They also emphasized the importance of individual thought and encouraged people to pursue noble spirit of our soul. As one of the leaders of Transcendentalism, Thoreau practiced what he preached. On

the day of American Independence Day, he moved to the *Walden* pond and began his two-year-life there. He wrote the *Walden* afterwards, criticizing the reality of industrial society and calling for returning to nature as well as pursuing spirit life.

3. The early contact with Chinese Classic Culture

3.1 The early contact between eastern culture and the western world

At first, we should understand the Chinese craze in the eighteenth century in Europe. “Chinese craze” means that after the opening of New Sea-route, the spreading of Chinese culture in the western world arose a heating culture phenomenon of deep affection of adoring and admiring Chinese culture as well as copying Chinese articles throughout the whole Europe. It began from the sixteenth and seventeenth century and moved to its climax in the middle of eighteenth century, and lasted long until the end of eighteenth century. The early contact with Chinese classic culture was attributed to missionaries. Classic works of Confucianism and other great ancient Chinese philosophers had been translated, such as “Yi Jing”, The Book of Changes, Book of Song and Book of Rite. The New Sea-route established a new bridge for the culture exchange between east and west.

Meanwhile, seventeenth and eighteenth century were the peak period of modern European philosophy. Lots of great philosophers appeared, such as the famous Hagel and Kant, while Leibniz was their pioneer. Leibniz had many aspects of scholar, and he was one of the most important natural scientists, mathematicians, physicists, historians and philosophers in German. He showed great interest in the distant and unfamiliar China and he did research about China all his life. His book, *Novissima Sinica* expounded his attitude to Chinese comprehensively. In his view, China and Europe represented the two poles of the world. He believed that Europeans are expert in thought while Chinese are better at observers.

During the period of Enlightenment, The Enlightenment of “China heat” is mainly manifested in the French thinkers. The enlightenment movement swept all the major countries in Europe, but its center was in France. The “Encyclopedia” was the core of French Enlightenment, a great many outstanding thinkers showed up including Diderot, Montesquieu, Hall Baha, lamettris, Helvetius. They advocated atheism and deism. Thinkers of Encyclopedia developed a deep understanding of China from the missionaries, finding out that China is a country of deism, and soon and showed great passion to China. Voltaire put Chinese as the best specimens of human society, and regarded China as the world’s most beautiful, the most ancient, the most vast and populous country in good governance and the best. He believed that the development of human civilization, science and technology were from China.

3.2 China-craze in nineteenth century in America

In the nineteenth century, the wave of China-craze swept in America. The translations of The Four Books(The Great Learning, The Doctrine of Mean, The Analects of Confucius, The Mencius) had spread through America. In the same period, transcendentalism developed rapidly in the New England area. The core point of transcendentalism is that people can transcend feeling and rational and recognize the knowledge of truth directly and it emphasizes the importance of intuition. They believed nature is the symbol of God, and emphasized the spirit, against the trend of materialism. The leading proponents of transcendentalism were Emerson and Thoreau. They studied in Eastern philosophy, especially Chinese classical philosophy, which influenced American Transcendentalists’ thoughts imperceptibly.

4. The Similar belief in nature

4.1 Lao Tzu’s attitude towards nature

In Chapter twenty-one of the Lao Tzu, it is said: “From the past to the present, its [Tao’s] name has not ceased to be, and has seen the beginning [of all things].” The Tao is that by which anything and everything comes to be. Since there are

always things, Tao never ceases to be and the name of Tao also never ceases to be. It is the beginning of all beginnings, and therefore it has seen the beginning of all things. Tao is indefinable, unlimited and unnamable. In LaoTzu, it is said that "From Tao there comes one. From one there comes two. From two there comes three. From three there comes all things". It means that the feature of Tao is that Tao is the source of the universe and makes all the things in the universe. In Taoism, nature is the embodiment of Tao. The way we respect nature is to show our respect to Tao. Naturalness is an important concept of Lao-tzu's philosophy. It refers to a natural state of being, an attitude of following the way of nature. Lao Tzu emphasized that everything in the world has its own way of being and development: birds fly in the sky, fish swim in the water, clouds float in the sky, flowers bloom and flowers fall. There is a sentence quoted from the Lao Tzu: Human learns from the earth, the earth learns from the heaven, the heaven learns from the Tao, and the law learns from Mother Nature. Here, Lao Tzu reveal the relationship between human, heaven, earth, Tao and nature. The behavior of human being is ought to follow the rules of nature. The ideology of nature- human integration in Taoism is the perfect expression of the relationship between human and nature. Lao Tzu admonished people should give up any desire to control the world. Following the way of nature is the way to resolving conflicts between human and the world. Even Chuang Tzu once said that Heaven and Earth coexist with me and everything is combined with me. It means that everything on earth coexists with human being and they are equal. They generate from the same source, so they obey the rules of Tao and nature and therefore they achieve the goal of unity. What's more, Taoism stresses that human could quest for inner spirit by accessing the nature. In ancient China, Taoism thought played an important role in society and was represented by many poems. Yuanming, Tao, an ancient poet in Chinese, once wrote that "I did not appeal to secular temperament, my character has always been fond of mountain". It expresses that Tao aspired after nature in his inherent quality.

4.2 The description in *Walden* and passion of nature

When we read the *Walden*, we can easily find out that Thoreau hold pretty much the same opinion with Taoism. Thoreau believed that only if we harmonize the relationship between human and nature and unite with the nature and purify the nature as well as accept the purification of nature can we achieve the salvation of the nature and human. "It would be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have beentaken to obtain them". He realized the contradiction between nature and the industrial civilization. He showed strong criticism to the industrial society. "That devilish Iron Horse, whose ear-rending neigh is heard throughout the town, has muddied the Boiling Spring with his foot, and he it is that has browed off all the woods on *Walden* shore." We have to admit that Thoreau was a man of foresight. He realized the harm brought by exceeding industrialization towards nature and understand the importance of harmony between human and nature. He knew that human is closely and inseparably related to nature. In *Walden*, Thoreau represented great admiration to nature and he described the pleasant scenery of *Walden* in details. "It was worth the while to see the sun shine on these things, and hear the free wind blow on them. A bird sits on the next bough, life-everlasting grows under the table, blackberry vines run round its legs." Thoreau was like a new-born child, exploring the nature with strong curiosity and great passion. "Not a fish can leap or an insect fall on the pond but it is thus reported in circling dimples, in lines of beauty, as it were the constant welling up of its fountain, the phenomena of the lake." From the words, Thoreau depicted us a magnificent picture of the nature and we can easily find out that Thoreau was deeply moved by the scene of nature. It can be said that he find peace from nature. Thoreau insisted that through the combination with nature, humans can overcome the spiritual stagnation, improve their worth and live in an ideal life. On this point, Thoreau's thought happened to coincide with Taoism.

5. Pursuing spirit and relief of heart

5.1 Taoism towards spirit

Taoists believe that man is a microcosm for the universe, so that man may gain knowledge of the universe by

understanding himself. Taoism advocates that individual nature and free spirit should be placed beyond the existence of all external appendages. People should walk away from the dilemma of life, burst restraint from the shackles of substance and pursue the liberation of individuality as well as freedom of life. Lao Tzu maintained the opinion: “recover one’s original simplicity”, thinking that the existence of human life should communicate with the natural and people should control and surpass the physical desire as well as make sure their peaceful and pure mind free from the disruption of joy or sorrow, maintaining their own nature. In Chuang Tzu’s view, the essence of life is freedom. However, the humanity, justice and morality, religion, secular value, reputation and interest in the social reality are chains and barriers of human being. Tao-Te Ching maintains the harmonious unity of human and the universe. It also discussed the problem of the self-harmony of people, namely the internal harmony of their own. He first explained the connotation of ecological man. The first to be mentioned is “without joy”. It means that a common mind without the influence of interest, reputation as well as wealth and other stuff. It is a kind of natural feelings that giving up fame and exercising one’s brain. The feeling of nature is commonly existing without happy and sorrow. It represents comfort, quiet, peace and nature. People should still indifferent, quietism, nature, poetic living. Also, it advocates a kind of simple and frugal lifestyle. People should be content and keep their inner peace. People should be harmonious with society in order to achieve harmony and interaction between individual and the nature in the universe.

5.2 Thoreau’s attitude

Thoreau lived in *Walden*, thought and wrote in nature in order to philosophize about life and the truth in society. He believed that the ultimate meaning of life should quest for nature, because one can only enrich his spirit and soul in nature. Thoreau thought that spirit is much more important than substance. In *Walden*, he wrote a lot to mention people to value spirit highly and improve the spiritual life. There is a passage recording that he wanted to buy a farm land from a farmer. “-cultivated it, and him too to some extent, I trust, and withdrew when I had enjoyed it long enough, leaving him to carry it on.” He has nothing, meanwhile he has everything. Even he did not possess the farm actually, he had already owned it in mind and enjoyed every inch of the land. “Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly” He realized the importance of material life, however, he paid more attention to pursue spirit. He inquired: “Why has man rooted himself thus formula in the earth, but that he may rise in the same proportion into the heavens above?” Thoreau put spirit first in his life’s pursuit. He truly appeals to society to understand the value of pursuing spirit world. He criticized the people who only ran after wealth and substance. He thought that they just “forged their own golden or silver fetters”.

6. Similar opinion of Wu wei (non-action)

6.1 the ideology of Wu wei in Taoism

Wu wei is a central concept in Taoism. The literal meaning of wu wei is “without action”. It is the guarantee of “naturalness”. The practice and efficacy of wu wei are fundamental in Taoist thought. The principle of “Wu wei” doesn’t mean we can not do anything but wait. What it means is that human’s enterprises should be built on the basis of naturalness, not on any attempts to interrupt the rhythm of nature. Human creativity should be in compliance with the ways of nature. “Activities are like many other things. If one has too much of them, they become harmful rather than good.” In the chapter forty-eight of Lao-tzu, it says that: “Conquering the world is invariably due to doing nothing; by doing something one cannot conquer the world”. Lao Tzu was going to tell us overdo always lead to fail. However, It doesn’t mean that we do nothing. Actually, what it is going to tell is that people should follow the rules of nature. The less we do, the less we disturb nature. Terrible consequence would come if we go against nature.

The ideology of Wu wei responds to naturalness. The suffering people meet always due to the disobedience of Tao and Te, which is the nature of everything. The reasons why people suffer pain because they overdo and desire too much. People have lost their original Te because they have too many desires and too much knowledge. In satisfying their desires, people are seeking for happiness. But when they try to satisfy too many desires, they obtain an opposite result.1

When we have less desire, we would not overdo and we could find peace in our inner mind.

6.2 Thoreau agreement with Wu wei

It is amazing to find that Thoreau hold the same opinion with Lao-tzu, even they were such different people in different period in history. Even Thoreau lived in *Walden*, being close to nature, he did not escape from the reality. He still concerned the society and trying to figure out the way to help the society develop better. In *Walden*, he wrote that “By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which still is built on purely illusory foundations”. People shackled themselves by establishing rules and laws, Therefore, Thoreau believed that the best government governs the less. It can be comprehended as the government should obey the rules of nature and let the citizens develop and govern on their own. And the government plays an role of auxiliary, helping people act freely and keeping the society in harmony.

7. Conclusion

Through the comparative study above, we can see that Thoreau’s thought is close to Taoism. They were both advocating returning to nature, against the rulers of power. They advocated the detachment from the secular society and returning to the embrace of nature. They called for the simple life and the pursuit of the spirit and the purification of spiritual. Thoreau absorbed the nutrition from the Taoism thought. Their thought has enriched the treasure house of human thinking. Even these two ideologies were put forward long time ago, they were still of great advantages in nowadays. Especially, in our modern society, nature is terribly damaged by human being and the ecology is in a loss balance. While the society polarized towards gaining money. We should ponder over the question about how to live in modern

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