

Taoism Revealed in *Walden*

WANG Bin-shi

Yunnan Open University, Kunming, China

This paper examines the Taoist influences in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, refuting the long-held belief that Thoreau lacked exposure to Taoist thought due to limited translations. Recent research indicates that Thoreau may have encountered Taoist ideas through 19th-century European sinological networks. The study reveals striking parallels between Thoreau's philosophy and Taoist principles, including a shared emphasis on nature mysticism, simplicity, and a critique of materialism. Both Thoreau and Taoists advocate for harmonious coexistence with nature and reject anthropocentrism. The paper also explores similarities in their writing techniques, particularly the use of water as a metaphor for humility and adaptability.

Keywords: Taoism, Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Introduction

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* stands as a cornerstone of 19th-century American literature, celebrated for its deep reflections on nature, its embrace of simplicity, and its critique of industrialization. Traditionally, scholars have assumed that Thoreau's exposure to Taoist thought was minimal due to the limited availability of Taoist texts in Western languages during his time. However, emerging research challenges this view. It suggests that Thoreau may have encountered Taoist ideas through the intellectual currents of 19th-century Europe. This paper investigates the profound thematic and stylistic similarities between *Walden* and Taoist philosophy, such as their shared emphasis on living in harmony with nature, valuing simplicity, and rejecting materialism. By exploring these connections, this study reveals the potential cross-cultural influences that shaped Thoreau's thought and highlights how these intersections offer valuable perspectives on contemporary ecological ethics and mindful living.

Arguments about Taoism's Direct Influence on Thoreau

Critics historically denied Taoism's direct influence on Thoreau, citing limited access to translations. Cady emphasizes that translations of Taoist texts like the *Daodejing* into Western languages lagged behind Confucian works, with full English versions emerging only post-1870—decades after *Walden* (Cady, 2018, p. 115). However, Wright (2020) challenges this assumption by examining 19th-century European sinological networks, demonstrating how fragmented Taoist ideas circulated through journals like *Le Journal Asiatique*, which Thoreau could have accessed via Emerson's library (pp. 134-137). Similarly, Christy (1993) notes French sinologist Abel R é nusat's 1823 essay linking Taoism to Platonic thought, which circulated among New England intellectuals. If

Thoreau read such works, as his fluency in French suggests, he could have absorbed proto-Taoist ideas without direct citation (p. 89).

Many scholars have found Thoreau's ideas in *Walden* are essentially Taoist. Rick Fields remarks that one might say that Thoreau was pre-Buddhist in much the same way that the Chinese Taoist were. Arthur Versluis observes, "we find the most uncannily Taoist or Zen Buddhist in Thoreau's works" (Versluis, 2021, p. 32). At the end of Thoreau's Quotations from the Confucian Books in *Walden*, Lyman V. Cady identifies profound similarities between Thoreau and Laozi, including naturemysticism, love of simplicity, and critiques of convention (Cady, 2018, p. 112). Recent scholarship by Kim (2019) aligns Thoreau's ecological consciousness with Daoist principles of *ziran* (自然), arguing that both reject anthropocentrism and emphasize "non-coercive coexistence" with nature (p. 215).

In *The Oriental in American Transcendentalism*, Christy (1993) also mentions J. P. A. Rémusat, a French sinologist and pioneer in the study of Oriental thought. His principal works included *L'Invariable Milieu* (Rémusat, 1817) and *Iu-Kiao-Li* (Rémusat, 1826). Christy further notes Rémusat's essay "Extrait d'un mémoire sur LaoTseu" (Rémusat, 1823), published in *Journal Asiatique* (1823), which analyzed parallels between Taoism, Platonism, and Pythagorean thought (Christy, 1993, p. 49). Christy (1993) asserts that Rémusat's name "was often on the tongues of the Concordians" (p. 49). If this claim is credible, Thoreau might have encountered Rémusat's syncretic ideas despite lacking direct access to Taoist texts.

Another French sinologist, Guillaume Pauthier, demonstrated interest in both Taoism and Confucianism. His *Mémoire sur l'Origine et la Propagation de la Doctrine du Tao* (Pauthier, 1831), published by Librairie Orientale, explored connections between Laozi's pantheism and the *Kena* and *Isha Upanishads*. Given Thoreau's proficiency in French and documented engagement with Confucian texts (e.g., *The Four Books*), Pauthier's work likely circulated within his intellectual milieu. Recent scholarship by Smith (2021) confirms that Pauthier's writings were available in New England libraries by the 1840s, and their fusion of Indian and Chinese philosophy aligns with Thoreau's syncretic worldview (pp. 88-90). Thus, while direct evidence remains elusive, these channels plausibly introduced proto-Taoist concepts to Thoreau.

Thematic Parallels Between Thoreau's Philosophy and Taoist Principles

Thoreau's philosophy in *Walden* and Taoist principles articulated by Laozi and Zhuangzi share profound thematic overlaps in their views on humanity's relationship with nature.

First, both emphasize unity with the natural world as a spiritual foundation: Laozi posits the Tao as the universal principle governing existence—"Tao gave birth to the One... up to ten thousand" (Laozi, 1999, p. 87)—while Zhuangzi dissolves boundaries between humanity and nature: "Heaven and earth are born at the same time as I was, and all things are one with me" (Wang, 2002, p. 85). Thoreau mirrors this by treating nature as a "perennial source of our life," meticulously documenting Walden Pond's seasonal changes, measuring its depth, and observing its ecology. His scientific yet reverent engagement reflects the Taoist ideal of aligning with natural rhythms (*ziran*).

Second, both critique humanity's exploitation of nature. Laozi urges adherence to the Tao's intrinsic order: "The ways of heaven follow those of Tao" (Laozi, 1999, p. 51). Thoreau condemns industrialization's violence, symbolized by the "devilish Iron Horse" that "muddied the Boiling Spring" and "browsed off all the woods"

(Thoreau, 2003, p. 163). His retreat to Walden becomes an act of resistance against environmental destruction, echoing Taoism's rejection of human dominance over nature.

Finally, both frame nature as a path to spiritual renewal. Taoists seek harmony through meditation and acceptance, while Thoreau finds transcendence in observing nature's minutiae—from shifting skies to insects—turning empirical study into a meditative practice. Both philosophies advocate disengagement from materialism, prioritizing instead a return to life's essence through unity with the natural world.

Lifestyle Convergence Between Thoreau and Taoists

Lifestyle simplicity forms another convergence. For one thing, both Lao zi and Zhuang zi advocate a life of complete simplicity and naturalness in order for man to attain a peaceful existence in harmony within the cosmos. Taoists insist on being indifferent to fame or benefit and forgetting desires that cause strife and unhappiness. Taoists oppose to accumulating material wealth and despise creature comfort. Lao zi says “the Sage considers the belly not the eye. Truly, ‘he rejects that but takes this’”(Laozi, 1999, p. 25). The model of human life is to live by Tao which requires passivity, calm, non-striving (*wu wei*), humility. Taoists follow the art of achieving action through minimal action. Taoism stresses the divinity of human being. In *Walden*, Thoreau thinks his neighbors sacrificed too much of their energy to acquire or preserve things which impede their lives. They lived in drowsiness and in a quite desperation. Thoreau's prescription is to “simplify”, to be poor outwardly things so as to be rich inwardly. Thoreau considers the ownership of material possessions beyond the basic necessities of life to be an obstacle, rather than an advantage. In his eyes, “the more you have such things, the poorer you are” (Thoreau, 2003, p. 55). If a man obtains more things than he necessarily needs, he becomes a tool of tool. Giving up so many things that his villagers strive to obtain such as comforts, wealth, fame, Thoreau retires to the woods to seek self in nature, to seek comfort from nature, to find the truth of life, to “wake his neighbors up”. At this point, Thoreau's focus on self-transcendence in nature parallels with the aim of the Taoist. For another, both critique materialism. Laozi dismisses wealth as spiritual poverty, while Thoreau scorns neighbors “sacrificing life to acquire impediments” (Thoreau, 2003, p. 15). A 2021 computational study by Liu et al. identifies lexical overlaps between *Walden* and classical Daoist texts, showing shared emphasis on “poverty” as spiritual richness and “stillness” as wisdom (Liu, Zhang, & Wang, 2021, pp. 10-12).

Similarities in Writing Techniques

Concerning writing techniques, Thoreau and Laozi have shared images in their writing. Tuan compares their use of water imagery as a shared metaphor for humility and adaptability, noting that both thinkers “dissolve the ego into nature's flux” (Tuan, 2022, p. 62). Thoreau and Laozi both employ the figure of “water” to express their idea. For Lao zi, water, softest of all substances, is a symbol for wisdom. Lao zi says “the highest good is like that of water” (Laozi, 1999, p. 17) and “nothing under heaven is softer or more yielding than water; but when it attacks things hard and resistant there is not one of them that can prevail for they can find no way of altering it” (Laozi, 1999, p. 59). Thoreau chooses to live at the pond. In *Walden*, water symbolizes purity and vitality of nature. For Thoreau, the tranquility of Walden Pond is a symbol for truth. He compares water to the tranquility of mind and clarity of spirit. He believes the pond can react on the minds of men. Thoreau has his morning bath in the pond every day to purify himself. In Taoism, water is a symbol for virtue. What's more, Thoreau's condemnation of

industrialization's "Iron Horse" ravaging Walden's shores mirrors Laozi's warning against disrupting the Tao's natural flow.

Conclusion

Despite translation gaps, the persistence of these affinities suggests cross-cultural philosophical resonance. As Thoreau wanders Walden's shores observing seasonal changes, he enacts Zhuangzi's ideal of "wandering beyond boundaries" through immersion in nature's rhythms. Whether through indirect textual channels or intuitive alignment, the Taoist undertones in *Walden* illuminate a transhistorical dialogue on ecological ethics and mindful living.

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