

The Analysis of Confucius Influence on Walden from the Perspective of Human Cultivation

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Abstract: Henry David Thoreau is a great American writer of romanticism and an important representative figure of transcendentalism, *Walden* is one of his masterpieces. Thoreau had lived by the side of Walden Lake for over two years, the book *Walden* records his daily life beside the lake and his introspection on life, society and human being. In *Walden*, Thoreau quoted Confucianism for 10 times, although there are some misunderstandings and misquotations, the quotations definitely show that Confucius impacts Thoreau a lot. This paper focus on Thoreau's opinions about self-cultivation in *Walden* to discuss Confucius's impact on Thoreau, and analyze why Confucius has made such an influence based on the social background and historical origin.

1. Introduction

Among many great writers in Romanticism, Henry David Thoreau won himself a prestigious position in American literature, especially in American transcendentalism. He was born in a business family in 1817. His hometown, Concord, has wonderful landscape in four seasons, in Thoreau's childhood, he always went to wood to feel the nature, and thought about the essence of life. Later, he met Ralph Waldo Emerson, their views of life had much in common and were generally called transcendentalism. *Walden* was published in 1854, and it took Thoreau five years to complete. It was based on Thoreau's two-year's solitary living at Walden Pond from 1845 to 1847.

Walden was a typical work of transcendentalism. Transcendentalism appeared in America as a reaction against materialistic-oriented life and was in essence American idealism. It represented a new way of looking at the universe, man and the relation between nature and god. Henry David Thoreau went to the wood to try a new way of life for himself and for his followers, that was a kind of living way that escaped from material life and wealth. *Walden* focused on the relation between man and man, man and nature, and man and society. Thoreau found himself to become a better man after he came back from the wood, thus regeneration became the major theme of this book. *Walden* was made up of 18 chapters, and each chapter had its own title and theme.

Confucius was a well-known philosopher, educator, and the founder of the Confucian school in the Spring and Autumn period of ancient China. Confucius's words and deeds had made a great influence on traditional Chinese thought and his thoughts were mainly found in the collection of quotations-style essays: *The Analects of Confucius*. Confucius started the private lectures, he advocated benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and trustworthiness. As for human

cultivation, first of all, Confucius claimed that man on earth, good at birth, he believed that human nature are good when they are born, that was the evil things in society that made human become hypocritical, cruel and bad tempered. Second, Confucius stressed the importance of good habits, for example, he claimed that when we learn some new knowledge, we should make a review regularly. What's more, he believed that with simple material condition, one could also enjoy his life and rich material condition was not possible element to have a rich inner world.

In *Walden*, Thoreau quoted Confucianism for ten times, and six of them were about self-cultivation. The starting point of Confucius' personal cultivation thought was based on human beings, pursuing the ideal realm of moral personality, while pursuing "loyalty and forgiveness" throughout the entire process, pursuing life cycle fit and moral consciousness. In the process of practicing benevolence, he emphasized practicing and paying attention to practice. The Confucian school believed that the "good nature", which refers to the original and initial state of a person. When people are born, their nature are good, but after experiencing various things or bad people, they become bad. Confucius was born in an aristocratic family, but he pursued the prosperity of the spiritual world without paying attention to whether the material life was rich or not. Through the reading of *Walden*, we can find some of Thoreau's ideas are similar to Confucianism, for example, Thoreau attached great importance to the cultivation of personal ideological and moral cultivation, which was corresponding to Confucianism's theory of good human nature. He emphasized the importance of the spiritual world and believed that a life that focuses only on material and enjoyment is not a real life, which was similar to Confucianism's attention to spiritual life. What's more, Confucius and Thoreau also had many similarities in their emphasis on personal habits and virtues.

These influences of Confucianism on Thoreau were because Thoreau found ideological resonance in classical Chinese philosophical thought. He drew on the beneficial ideological discourse of Chinese Confucian philosophy to enrich and improve his own ideological system. The reasons for this impact were manifold, such as the spread of ancient Chinese ideology and culture in the Western world at that time, the many negative effects of Western industrialization on society at that time, which made many thinkers and philosophers feel dissatisfied, and the impact of the idea of simple life and hard work in the basic religion of Puritanism in the United States.

In the past years' research, there are many achievements. In Yang Lin's *Confucianism in Walden—A Comparative Study of Walden and the Four Books*, she objectively analyzes how Confucianism influences an American writer and how it is represented in his representative work. From what she has presented, Thoreau's attitude towards Confucianism is absorbing what he needs and altering what he does not need to serve for his own ideas. [9] In Qin Liu's *Man and Nature in Walden*, the author analyzes Thoreau's retreat to nature is not an escape, but an attempt to put his belief into practice, aiming to find a model for the harmonious co-existence between man and nature. The records of his simple life in *Walden* proves that man and nature can live in harmony with each other, and provides a good example for human beings to solve the spiritual and environmental crises, which is similar to Confucius's ecological philosophy.[8] In Wang Miao's *Chinese Thought in Walden and People's Acceptance*, Wang Miao briefly introduce the Chinese thought contained in *Walden* and its acceptance in China and the United States. But the analysis is too general and lack further discussion. In *The Rise of Confucian Citizens in China: Theoretical Reflections and Empirical Explorations* by Canglong Wang, the author explains the development and influence of Confucianism in China from the perspective of Westerners [10].

On the basis of previous studies, this paper analyzes the influence of Confucius on Thoreau's personal cultivation thought reflected in *Walden* from three aspects: theory of original goodness of human nature, the importance of good habits, and simple material condition and rich inner world. And to analyze why Confucianism has exerted such a huge influence from three parts: dissemination of Chinese traditional thoughts abroad, the development of industrialization and the original thought

of the country.

2. Confucius's influence on *Walden* from the perspective of human cultivation

Thoreau had early contact with and interest in Chinese Confucianism. As early as 1838, when Thoreau had just left college, he mentioned Confucius in his diary. Thoreau's *Walden* quoted 10 Confucianism from the "Four Books", and six of them were about self-cultivation, which showed some of the elements in Thoreau's ideas about human cultivation were correspond to the ideas that Confucius wanted to convey.

2.1 Theory of original goodness of human nature

Mencius said, "Primitive good nature of man is just like the water which always runs downwards and no man was born evil and no water runs upwards." (Mencius, 33)[5] However, because of the influences of different living environments, their natures may be changed from good to evil. Mencius believed that human beings were born with four hearts: compassion, shame, resignation, and right and wrong. These four hearts also correspond to the ends of benevolence, courtesy and wisdom. In Mencius's view, these four hearts were dominated by compassion, that is, compassion for oneself, and compassion for others.

Thoreau was the spokesman of original goodness of human nature, in Chapter 17 *Spring*, he described the scene of spring in Walden Lake, pointing out that spring is full of hope, and the first morning of spring re-creates the world, all sins on earth can be forgiven. Everyone can restore innocence, even thieves, alcoholics will be placed in a good atmosphere, they turn to the hard and honest work. Thoreau quoted from *Mencius, Gaozi*: "A return to goodness produced each day in the tranquil and beneficent breath of the morning, causing that in request to the love of virtue and the hatred of vice, one approaches a little the primitive nature of man, as the sprouts of the forest which has been felled. In like manner the evil which one does in the interval of a day prevents the germs of virtues which begin to spring up again from developing themselves and destroys them." (Mencius, 74) [5] Mencius used analogies to show that trees grow better in the suburbs far from where humans cut them down, just as humans, who are originally good, are captured by the world then lose their original purpose, just as tree and grass eaten by sheep and cow, they have lost their nature of beauty.

In Chapter 17 *Spring*, although Thoreau misunderstood the meaning of these sentences, Mencius wanted to convey that the hardest thing to manage in the world is to manage ourselves. Human beings were strongly influenced by their habits, the good thoughts that arose in our hearts would very soon be extinguished by reality. But Thoreau here was to express that the spring of nature is a time of rebirth for man. Thoreau's idea that human beings are reborn in spring was similar to Mencius's idea of the day-night cycle, and they believed that people's loss is mostly because they allow themselves to fall in the secular life, but human nature is possible to return to purity, so they must seize the opportunity to modify themselves.

Above all, although their expressions about human nature were not absolutely same, there is no doubt that Confucianism's original goodness has exerted a great influence to Thoreau.

2.2 The importance of good learning habits

As a great educator in ancient China, Confucius believed that regardless of wealth or race, everyone could attend school and receive education. In order to implement this principle, Confucius stated when recruiting students that as long as one is willing to learn and voluntarily presents 10 pieces of dried meat as a gift, he could become a disciple. The fact shew that his disciples came from various feudal states, and their composition was complex. They came from different social classes,

and most of them came from ordinary people. In terms of learning, Confucius believed that learning methods were very important. Confucius said: “Learning without thinking is useless, thinking without learning is perilous.” (Confucius, 31) [6] He emphasized that after learning new knowledge, it was necessary to regularly review it. If not, the newly learned knowledge would be quickly forgotten. At the same time, he also believed that a person could always learn from others, so it was important to remain humble and diligent in seeking advice and learning from others, just as what he said: “When three are walking together, I am sure to find teachers among them. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them.” (Confucius, 137) [6]

In *Walden*, Thoreau quoted in Chapter1: “To know that we know what we know, and that we do not know what we do not know, that is true knowledge.” (Confucius, 32)[7] Here was a misquotation. This Confucius’s famous saying wanted to convey that people should be studious and diligent, and if there’s something you don’t know, you should not pretend to understand. But Thoreau wanted to elaborate on the role of personal living environment and daily necessities here. He held the belief that a person’s lifestyle is influenced by their perception of the living environment. He believed that if a person categorizes imagined facts into facts they understand, then everyone would ultimately build their own lives on that foundation. This indicated that he has not yet formed a deep, comprehensive, and systematic understanding of Chinese Confucianism.

However, through the analysis of the above citations, it can be seen that in Thoreau’s view, Chinese Confucianism has a universal significance.

2.3 Simple material condition and rich inner world

Confucius said: “Incomparable indeed was Hui! A handful of rice to eat, a gourdful of water to drink, living in a mean street. Others would have found it unendurable depressing, but to Hui’s cheerfulness it made no difference at all. Incomparable indeed was Hui.” (Confucius, 112) [6] Confucius praised his disciple Hui here. Hui came from a poor background and had a poor family situation, but even though he lived in a harsh environment, he did not feel sad. Instead, he enjoyed himself and enjoyed a simple life. Confucius stressed the importance of spiritual condition, he believed that people can be in poor material condition, but cannot be futile in his inner world, one should improve himself by life-long learning.

Thoreau tried to minimize his own needs in Walden, he held that spiritual richness is real wealth, one’s soul might not help one to get up in the world, but it would help make real progress in self-improvement[1]. In Chapter1 Economy, He pointed out that although people’s life could not be separated from daily necessities, like clothes and food, but these necessities of life could be as simple as possible, because life is not satisfied with these small things. He thought that the rich man had merely chained himself with metal, and that he himself was essentially poor. Thoreau was very critical of the modern life, he criticized the social issues and inequality caused by industrialization and he also believed that people’s life is too complicated. He expressed his enthusiasm about simple life in *Walden*: “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! ...Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary but one: instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion.” (Thoreau, 84) [7]

Thoreau believed that the simple life is the only path which led to the perfection of one person. Though one had to provide himself with food, clothing, and shelter, he could do it with simplicity and with as little effort as possible [2]. For Thoreau, poverty meant simplicity. Here can be seen, Thoreau’s voluntary poverty certainly absorbed the philosophy in Confucianism.

3. The causes of the influence

There are many reasons why Confucius’s ideas had such an impact on Thoreau as far away as the

United States. First of all, dissemination of Chinese traditional thoughts abroad. With the development of ancient Chinese shipbuilding industry, Chinese classical ideas continued to spread to the west, American missionaries in which the United States to accept Chinese cultural ideas played a great role, *Indo-Chinese Gleaner* is an important way for missionaries to introduce Confucius and China to westerners. Second, as the process of industrialization in the United States, many Americans were very dissatisfied with such social conditions, especially workers, in the process of industrialization they received unfair treatment and experienced hard work. They aimed to create a newly, loving way of life. So they searched for a proper lifestyle from foreign culture. And lastly, Puritanism was the original religion in America, which advocated a frugal, religious, and honest lifestyle, they lived a simple way of life. To some degree, it has some similarities to Confucianism.

3.1 Dissemination of Chinese traditional thoughts abroad

It is well known that Chinese culture had an important influence on the European Enlightenment in the 18th century, particularly, many elements and characteristics of Confucianism provide important ideological weapons for the Enlightenment to criticize European autocracy and theocracy. “China played a pivotal role in the conception of the major themes of 18th-century philosophy, politics and economics. For example, the rule of law, deism, enlightened monarchism, the role of the intellectuals, the physiocrats, all of which came from or were legitimized by China,” said the French scholar Louis Cuisermans in an interview.

The spread of ancient Chinese culture has two major factors. On the one hand, the shipbuilding industry has developed greatly in Song dynasty. On the basis of the accumulation of the former dynasties, the shipbuilding industry in Yuan and Ming dynasties reached the heyday of ancient Chinese shipbuilding industry. The Treasure voyages has promoted the spread of Chinese civilization and the development of our country’s maritime cause. Its significance has gone far beyond navigation itself and become an important part of the world’s maritime history. On the other hand, the western invasion of China, since the 1840, the First Opium War, Chinese experienced the westerner’s invasion and colonial plunder again and again, to some degree, it pushed the communication between Chinese and foreign culture[11].

Indo-Chinese Gleaner, the first English-language publication about China founded by Anglo-American missionaries, not only promoted the understanding of early American society about China, but also deepened Americans’ understanding of Confucius. The thoughts came to the United States via merchant ships plying between China and the United States. It was picked up and read by many institutions and individuals in the United States, thus entering the thought of Confucius and the view of China in American society [11].

Ralph Waldo Emerson was “The Confucius of America,” and Thoreau became a good student, they accepted Confucianism at nearly the same time. Thoreau consciously embraced Confucianism and under Ralph Waldo Emerson’s guidance, introduced Confucianism in the United States. In his two works of the same period, *A Week on the River*” and “*Walden*,” Thoreau made extensive use of Confucian quotations. Throughout his life, Thoreau took a critical view of China, continuing to explore Confucianism and importing Chinese classics into the United States.

3.2 The development of industrialization

In the first half of the 19th century, the United States entered the period of industrialization, great progress was made in social economy and the process of social development was accelerated. But at the same time, there were also many social problems, such as environmental pollution, worker unemployment, poor quality of life for lower class and so on. Many advanced American thinkers, politicians and philosophers were constantly looking for solutions. In terms of environment pollution,

with the acceleration of industrialization and urbanization in the United States, the urban environment was gradually deteriorating and the pollution problem was serious. The Smoky, dirty city was a stark contrast to the fresh air and clear water of nature.

The Confucian view of nature included two aspects: the harmonious coexistence of man and nature and the origin of man and nature. The former was the cognitive basis of the latter, the latter was the theoretical deepening of the former. The harmonious coexistence of man and nature mainly shew that man and nature cannot be separated, and that man should go with the flow and live accordingly [3]. Nature was neither the enemy of man, nor the object of man's conquest, but the relatives and friends of man, nature was the home of human survival, loving for nature is to care for human beings, to maintain nature is to maintain the human's home. It was closely related to the origin of Chinese civilization and the mode of agricultural economy. In a certain sense, it was the reflection of the life style of Chinese agricultural civilization.

Thoreau was a naturalist and a realist, who had devoted all his life to finding a proper lifestyle for human existence. His retreat to the woods was an exploration of the essence of life. His solitary living at the woods was a great experiment on establishing a harmonious society. From my point of view, his return to nature, to live in the side of Walden Lake was a kind of return to agricultural society. In Chapter 7 The Bean-Field, Thoreau talked about his days of growing beans and hoeing, and his life on the farm, which was a way for him to escape from the industrialized cities, and he thought that in nature he had discovered the beauty of life and was able to look at himself better, and understood the meaning of life. Thoreau's ideas and explorations in *Walden* pointed out the way to a harmonious society, and proved that man and nature can live in harmony with each other, and provided a good example for human beings to solve the spiritual and environmental crises.

3.3 The original thought of the United States

Perry Miller, a historian and literary scholar in the middle of the last century, presiding over much of the literary and historical research on the early American culture. He said: "You cannot understand American literature without understanding puritanism." (Perry Miller, 2) [4] This sentence is true. Puritan thought and Puritan literature are important parts of American culture and American literature, it has a long history of influence on American literature.

Early American puritanical literature emphasized the edifying role of literature and the promotion of values and moral concepts through literary works, thus influencing people's behavior and life patterns, this was the most prominent feature and tradition of American Puritan literature.

American puritanism and Confucianism have similar connotations in some places. They both believe that people should study hard, work hard and pay attention to the improvement of personal character. Although Thoreau is not a Puritan, but it is inevitable that he was influenced by the fixed mode of thinking that the basic ideas of the United States had created a thought similar to Puritan thought would make it easier for him to accept.

4. Conclusion

Confucianism had exerted a great impact on Thoreau in terms of human cultivation.

Thoreau's *Walden* cited Chinese Confucianism for ten times, which proved to a great extent Thoreau's recognition and admiration of Chinese classical wisdom. Thoreau developed American "Transcendentalism thought" by absorbing classical Chinese ideas. Thoreau recognized its important value and universal significance, internalized it as part of American Transcendentalism. And from his intentional misquotations in the book, we can make a conclusion that Thoreau's attitude towards Confucianism was absorbing what he needed and altered what he did not need to serve for his own ideas.

This influence is attributed to the collision and exchange of world culture in the process of globalization. Thoreau accepted the Confucianism which was suitable for him to spread his thoughts and put it to use with his own understanding. At the same time, the development of industrialization had also played a role in promoting people's discontent to constantly find ways to improve social life. In the end, Americans' acceptance of Confucianism comes down to cultural similarities[12].

The American's view of Confucius, was more positive at the early time. But from the early 19th century, Confucius's image declined sharply as the negative influence of European businessmen and the European diplomatic corps increased dramatically. Even today, despite the establishment of the Confucius Institute in the West, cultural communication about Chinese traditional culture in this area is still not that good, thus causing many cultural misunderstandings and conflicts [11].

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