

## From Thoreau to Haizi: the Spread and Return of “Nature Affection”

Yucheng Li

China Foreign Affairs University, Beijing 100037, China

**Keywords:** Intercultural communication, Thoreau, Haizi, Tao yuanming, Chinese literature

**Abstract:** The nature affection is a unique heritage in classical Chinese culture. In the nineteenth century, with the emerging Oriental fever in the American Renaissance, this nature affection spread westward and was absorbed and embraced by writers such as Thoreau, who, in their works, incorporated the Chinese nature affection into their own transcendentalist ideas based on the needs of their own national culture development. A century later, with the introduction of “Walden” and other works in China, many Chinese scholars rediscovered and reabsorbed this China-derived nature affection. Taking the poet Haizi's acceptance of it as an example, this paper aims to explore this phenomenon of two-way cultural exchange and interaction between Chinese and Western cultures.

### 1. Introduction

The nature affection is a major theme in classical Chinese culture. Many Chinese canons demonstrated awe and celebration of nature, not only revealing the truth that nature nurtures mankind but also showing the gratitude of man for nature. At the same time, in classical Chinese literature, the literati projected the wisdom of life and aesthetic appreciation into the eco-world and have made nature serve as a metaphor for the spiritual home. This nature affection has become one of the great legacies of classical Chinese literature and seeking the landscape to soothe the soul and to gain spiritual peace has also become an important feature of traditional Chinese culture.

This unique classical Chinese nature affection reached far and wide and was absorbed and adapted by many Western scholars. Out of the need to establish American national culture, writers such as Emerson and Thoreau took their eyes to the Axial Age, where human culture was convergent and drew inspiration from Indian religious texts and classical Chinese culture for the construction of their own national culture. (Chirity 187) The spirit of introspection and the harmony between nature and man conveyed by classical Chinese culture have fit deeply into the transcendentalists' desire to break down the barriers of old European culture. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) and “Walden” (1854), Thoreau's meticulous portraits of mountains and water, plants and animals, farming scenes, and variations in climate were all parts of the American Concord, yet anyone familiar with Chinese culture can sense the classical Chinese vibe and the imagery between the lines. By reading these passages, one will find traces of the westward spread of classical Chinese natural feelings.

Moreover, more than a century later, as the works of American transcendentalist writers were translated into China, this kind of nature writing, which struck Chinese readers as *déjà vu*. A number of contemporary Chinese scholars have a profound and particular appreciation and passion for Thoreau's “Walden” and have incorporated the ideas about man and nature from Thoreau's books in their own works. Through this path, it may be argued that the nature affection originating from classical China has undergone a spiritual homecoming.

### 2. The Spread of “Nature Affection”: the Embodiment of the Classical Chinese View of Nature in Thoreau's Works

The embodiment of the classical Chinese view of nature in Thoreau's works can be found in two main aspects: one is the direct impact of Confucian ecological views, and the other is that Thoreau's

views on the relationship between land and individuals are akin to those of the Chinese hermit Tao Yuanming.

On the one hand, Thoreau directly quoted the Confucian classics and expressed his ecological views by drawing on the Confucian idea of the unity of nature and man. According to Jeffrey S. Cramer, Thoreau's quotations from the "Four Books" in "Walden" were translated by himself from Jean-Pierre-Guillaume Pauthier's French version of Confucius et Mencius: *Les Quatre Livres de la Chine*. There are inevitably some misinterpretations, but in general, Thoreau's understanding of the harmony between nature and man and the reverence for nature are consistent at their core with Confucianism. For example, in "Walden", Thoreau quoted *The Doctrine of the Mean*,

"How vast and profound is the influence of the subtle powers of Heaven and of Earth! We seek to perceive them, and we do not see them; we seek to hear them, and we do not hear them; identified with the substance of things, they cannot be separated from them. They cause that in all the universe men purify and sanctify their hearts, and clothe themselves in their holiday garments to offer sacrifices and obligations to their ancestors. It is an ocean of subtle intelligences. They are everywhere, above us, on our left, on our right; they environ us on all sides."

Confucius believed that nature is sacred and omnipresent, and therefore emphasized that people should practice fasting and meditation and perform proper rituals. Thoreau took this quotation to show how extensive and far-reaching the power of nature is, how close nature is to man, and how man should maintain respect for the sacredness of nature. Since modern times, with the development of science and technology, the original mystery and untamed beauty of nature has gradually faded and been damaged, one should realize that while science brings material wealth to man, the beauty of nature must still not be ruined. In the chapter on "solitude", Thoreau mentions that "Nearest to all things is that power which fashions their being. Next to us the grandest laws are continually being executed." This is a direct reflection of the Confucian idea of "the harmony of nature and man".

On the other hand, Thoreau's embrace of Chinese nature affection is also found in the similarities between his reclusive life and that of Tao Yuanming. Although it remains an unsolved mystery whether Thoreau had ever studied Tao Yuanming's poetry, they did share the universal and perennial human yearning for freedom and happiness. Tao Yuanming lived in the last decades of the Eastern Jin dynasty (317-420) and the first seven years of the Liu Song dynasty (420-479), a period when China was plagued by turmoil. In his own day, Yuanming was an unsuccessful official and little-known poet; his reputation in his homeland depended largely on his status as a virtuous hermit. Both Thoreau and Tao Yuanming treated nature as their spiritual sustenance and lived hermit-like lives at certain phases of their lives.

Certainly, the motives for their seclusion were not identical, but they were both concerned with the same question, namely, how one should live. In a way, these two confidantes have chosen to break away from the conventional, conformist but meaningless life of the masses at their time, rather they chose to be true to their soul by embracing nature and solitude.

First of all, both of them enjoyed a more profound connection with nature through labor to different degrees, and discovered aesthetic pleasure in farming work, transforming labor into spiritual cultivation. Whether in ancient China or in nineteenth-century New England, the prevailing view was that scholars like Tao Yuanming and Thoreau should not engage in farm work. But neither Tao Yuanming nor Thoreau had such a sense of superiority. In Tao Yuanming's "Encouraging Farming", the poet used the ancient myth to argue for the value of farm work: "Shun plowed with his own hand / Yu also sowed and reaped" Echoing Tao Yuanming, Thoreau viewed farming as a philosophical endeavor too. In "The Bean-field" of "Walden", Thoreau depicted the toil and harvest of growing beans in the summer and took the story of Antaeus to show that by doing farmwork, one can feel the connection between man and nature, and draw the strength from the soil. Perhaps to a large extent, compared to Thoreau, for Tao Yuanming, farming was not only for spiritual cultivation but also a necessity to sustain life. But this deep affection for the land forged in labor, the self-sufficiency that blessed by nature, is undoubtedly a natural affection that Tao Yuanming and Thoreau enjoyed together, regardless of race or era.

More importantly, by returning to nature and opting for solitude, Thoreau and Tao Yuanming did not isolate themselves from the masses, but rather kept their distance from them. The purity and beauty of nature were used to highlight the significance of maintaining a tranquil inner being. Taking this famous poem by Tao Yuanming as an example:

Among the haunts of men I build my cot,  
There's noise of wheels and hoofs, but I hear not.  
How can it leave upon my mind no trace?  
Secluded heart creates secluded place. (Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

Thoreau expresses a similar view in the chapter "Solitude" in "Walden", "...I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature ... an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since." (92) By taking himself as an example, Thoreau argued that one can maintain his or her independence and serenity in any situation as long as one's soul can embrace the tranquil power of nature.

Through the above examples, it can be concluded that Thoreau absorbed and accepted Chinese nature at least on three levels: first, the Confucian idea of the unity of heaven and man, to maintain respect for the divinity of nature, and to seek a harmonious coexistence with nature. Second, the farmwork was abstracted to an aesthetic and philosophical level, to appreciate the soil in farming, as well as to reflect on life. Third, the emphasis on personal inner cultivation, to maintain the purity and inner peace of the self no matter how things change in the world.

### 3. The Return of "Nature Affection": the Case of Haizi

As the nature affection spread westward, Thoreau and other western scholars made creative interpretations of it. More than a century later, it returned to modern China through the introduction of "Walden" and other works. This return to nature affection is particularly pronounced in the works of contemporary Chinese poet Haizi. There is also the sense of "the unity of heaven and man" in Haizi's poetry, as well as a deep attachment to the land and the importance of maintaining the purity and serenity of the mind.

When Haizi threw himself under the train, he brought four books with him, and Thoreau's "Walden" was among them. During his lifetime, Haizi not only wrote *Thoreau the man has a brain* to express his appreciation of Thoreau but also made a comparison between Thoreau and Tao Yuanming in his *Poetics: a syllabus*. What's more, he had dedicated the poem "The Sixth Chant" to Thoreau. All these show his high recognition and acceptance of Thoreau.

Haizi heartily endorsed Thoreau's view of nature. He found in Thoreau's work what he had been seeking, the ideal of keeping a distance from the mundane and maintaining inner tranquility. In *Poetics: a syllabus*, Haizi expressed "Thoreau expressed his deep concern for life and existence in his works. His ideas inspired me and became the quest of my life and the purpose of my poetic creation." In the stanza "Sowing Beans in the South Mountain - for Thoreau and Tao Yuanming", Haizi wrote: "Who says idyll? I fluttered over the river". These two lines seem to be unrelated, but they provide a graphic summary of Haizi's view of life and writing. The idyll is an important theme in Haizi's poetry. Both Haizi and Thoreau were people who entrusted the meaning of life to nature and the countryside. Moreover, to some extent, this tendency to deify nature and to aspire towards a wonderful idyllic landscape also stems from the idea of the unity of nature and man in Confucianism.

Haizi spent his life appealing to the very land where the grain grew. His lyrics are usually about the land and the beings on the land. For instance, in his poem "history" he wrote: "Feet stuck in the land / will never be pulled out / those lonely blossoms / are the lost lips of spring." When he returned to his hometown from the city and encountered the desolation of changing times, Haizi wrote in his *Poetics: a syllabus* "What I am saying is that having lost the land, these modern wandering souls must find a substitute - that is, desire, superficial desire. The magnificent vitality of the earth is replaced and denoted only by desire, which shows how much we have lost." This is not only the same issue that Thoreau has constantly pursued but also a recurrence of the classical

Chinese nature affection, the deep attachment was also an important part of the ancient Chinese literati's writing.

Haizi's reverence for the divinity of nature and his deep love for the land, as well as his longing for inner peace in a materialistic world which he empathized with those in Thoreau's works, are indeed echoes of nature affection. Perhaps without realizing it, Haizi had taken a long detour to find his "soulmate", as the concepts were actually derived from the nature affection in China land. Of course, as time goes by, writers in different social backgrounds do not embrace nature affection in the same way, and the concept is constantly evolving. At the same time, it was also due to the fact that in Haizi's time, as a modern Chinese poet, he was somehow not sufficiently cognizant of classical Chinese culture. For example, Haizi once criticized: "I hate the literary temperament of Eastern poets, who are pale and weak and self-righteous, who hide and revel in their own fun ...Tao Yuanming and Thoreau both returned to nature at the same time, but while Tao only cared about pleasure, Thoreau showed great concern for human life and existence. This is the goal of my poetry, which must abandon literary interest and focus directly on life and existence itself." As already discussed, Haizi's assertion about the Eastern poets (represented by Tao Yuanming) is inaccurate, and Haizi has not really abandoned the classical Chinese poetic tradition, whether intentionally or spontaneously, Haizi's poetry still embraces the spirit of classical Chinese nature affection.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The spread of nature affection is mainly reflected in Thoreau's acceptance of Confucianism's idea of the harmony between nature and man, as well as the love of the land and the emphasis on maintaining inner peace in his works, which are akin to the Chinese poet Tao Yuanming. And Haizi, as an important contemporary Chinese poet as well as a famous Thoreau devotee, has welcomed, perhaps unintentionally, the return of the affection of nature. Of course, we must be aware that, although speaking of the return of nature affection, this does not mean that it has ever detached from China.

Nature affection, as part of classical Chinese culture, has always been deeply rooted in the veins of the Chinese people. The ideal of the harmonious coexistence of man and nature and the individual's fulfillment and happiness in nature is an ideal that belongs to all mankind. And it continues to emanate new charms with cultural exchanges and mutual appreciation. The significance in the case of the spread and return of nature affection is that, on the one hand, it demonstrates the essence of traditional Chinese culture can evolve and develop with the times through communication; on the other hand, it proves that the richness and universality of Chinese culture can provide a reference for answering global problems. In the process of exchange and mutual appreciation, Chinese and Western cultures will be re-invented and blossom into more splendid results.

#### **References**

- [1] Thoreau, Henry David. "Walden." Princeton University Press, 2004-4.
- [2] Chirity, Arthur. "The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A study of Emerson, Thoreau and Alcott". Columbia University Press, 1932 pp.187.
- [3] Cady, Lyman V. "Thoreau's Quotations from the Confucian Books in Walden." *American Literature*, vol. 33, no. 1, Duke University Press, 1961, pp. 20-32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2922403>.
- [4] R. Davis. "Tao Yuan-ming, His Works and Their Meaning, 1983.
- [5] Hong Zeng. "An English Translation of Poems of the Contemporary Chinese Poet Hai Zi", Edwin Mellen Press, 2006.
- [6] Yu Ouyang. "In Your Face: Contemporary Chinese Poetry in English Translation", Otherland Literary Journal, 2002.