

“THOREAU AND TAOISM”

DAVID T.Y. CH'EN¹

TO THE STUDENT of Thoreau who is familiar with Chinese culture, Walden is similar to a traditional Chinese government, Confucian in form and Taoist in spirit, for the book is full of quotations from the Confucian books, while its ideas are essentially Taoist.² Lin Yutang, for example, says that Thoreau was the “most Chinese of all American authors in his entire view of life” and that he could “translate passages of Thoreau into Chinese and pass them off as original writing by a Chinese poet without raising any suspicion.³ Specifically he notes that Thoreau was like Chuangtse⁴ in his ruggedness and hardness and his individualistic impatience.⁵ Lyman V. Cady points out that there are profound similarities between Walden and The Book of Tao, namely, their nature mysticism, love of the simple and primitive, distaste for convention and governmental interference, and the repeated use of paradox.⁶ In addition, Theodore Dreiser also remarks in passing that Thoreau resembles Buddha, Jesus, and Laotse.⁷

1. [David T.Y. Ch'en](#), “Thoreau and Taoism” in Narasimhaiah, C.D., ed., 1972, ASIAN RESPONSE TO AMERICAN LITERATURE, Vikas Publications, Delhi, India, pages 406-16

THOREAU AND CHINA

2. Lyman V. Cady, “Thoreau’s Quotations from the Confucian Books in Walden,” *American Literature* (March 1961), pages 20-32
3. [Lin Yu-t'ang](#), THE IMPORTANCE OF LIVING, page 128
4. Chuangtse, Chinese philosopher, died about 275 BCE, was a contemporary of Mencius and the greatest exponent of Taoism, the founder of which was Laotse. See [Lin Yu-t'ang](#), THE WISDOM OF LAOTSE, page 9; also Herbert A. Giles, translation, CHUANG TZU, pages vii-xvii. There are several ways of spelling the name, such as Chuang Tzu, Chuang Tze, Tchoangtseu and Chuangtse. Throughout this paper the form “Chuangtse” will be used, except in direct quotations.
5. [Lin Yu-t'ang](#), THE WISDOM OF LAOTSE, pages 7-8
6. Lyman V. Cady, “Thoreau’s Quotations from the Confucian Books in Walden,” *American Literature* (March 1961), page 32
7. Theodore Dreiser, THE LIVING THOUGHTS OF THOREAU, page 8. Laotse the author of the Book of Tao, was the founder of Taoism. He flourished between the fifth and sixth centuries B.C., was a contemporary of Confucius. There are also several Western spellings for his name, such as Lao-tseu, Lao-tsi, Lao Tzu, and Laotse. The last form will be adopted except in direct quotations.



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN

These above statements seem to suggest that in one way or another Thoreau may have received some influence from Taoist literature. All critics, however, deny that Taoism had any influence on Thoreau. The reasons offered by Cady are representative of their arguments. Cady writes: Certainly Thoreau makes no reference to this school or its representative directly or indirectly. It seems quite clear that Thoreau was unacquainted with this respect of China's ancient heritage. The reason is not far to seek. The translations into Western languages of the Taoist literature and their publication lagged behind those of the Confucian Books. One French and two German translations appeared in the 1840's. but they apparently did not come into the attention of Thoreau, much less the earlier Jesuit translations into Latin. To his and our loss, he has not run into Lao Tzu or the writings of Chuang Tzu.⁸ Though Cady's arguments seem strong, they fail to convince me. The affinities between Thoreau and Taoism are too striking to be mere coincidences.

My research shows that there were sources of Taoist literature available to Thoreau. To begin with, Arthur Christy mentions that among the pioneering Oriental scholars with whom the Concordians were familiar there was a French sinologist by the name of J.P.A. Rémusat. His chief works were *L'Invariable Milieu*, published in 1817, and the *Iu-kiao-li*, which appeared in 1826. His name was often on the tongues of the Concordians.⁹ Christy also informs us that Emerson found in the *Invariable Milieu* promising definitions for nature; while Thoreau copied several quotations from the Chinese novel *Iu-kiao-li*, or "The Two Fair Cousins."¹⁰ In addition, Christy gives us Rémusat's "Extrait d'un memoire sur Lao Tseu," as an example of the significant, brief articles contained in the learned periodicals of comparative literature and the publications of the Oriental Societies of that time, and points out that this article dealt with the parallels of Taoism, Plato, and Pythagoras.¹¹ If Christy's statement that Rémusat's "name was often on the tongues of the Concordians" is creditable, Thoreau might well have read this article.

In the second place, Thoreau might have read the Taoist literature which was translated into French by G. Pauthier. Cady points out that in *A WEEK* Thoreau refers very favourably to a French translator and believes him to be Pauthier. He asserts that Thoreau's quotations from the Confucian books in *Walden* are neither from David Collie's *THE CHINESE CLASSICAL WORK, COMMONLY CALLED THE FOUR BOOKS*, nor from Joshua Marshman's *THE WORKS OF CONFUCIUS*, but from a French translation by G. Pauthier.¹²

8. Lyman V. Cady, "Thoreau's Quotations from the Confucian Books in *Walden*," *American Literature* (March 1961), page 32

9. Arthur Christy, *THE ORIENT IN AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM*, page 45

10. Arthur Christy, *THE ORIENT IN AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM* pages 317, 320

11. Arthur Christy, *THE ORIENT IN AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM*, page 459

12. Lyman V. Cady, "Thoreau's Quotations from the Confucian Books in *Walden*," *American Literature* (March 1961), pages 20-22



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN

With this I completely agree. But in regard to which book of Pauthier's did Thoreau use I choose to differ with him. In Cady's opinion, the book which Thoreau used was *LES LIVRES SACRES DE L'ORIENT*, which was first published in Paris in 1841, republished in 1842 and in subsequent editions.¹³

To me, *CONFUCIUS ET MENCIVS* was more likely the book which Thoreau used. In the CATALOG OF THE STEPHEN H. WAKEMAN COLLECTION OF BOOKS OF NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN WRITERS, listing the books auctioned by the American Art Association in New York, on April 24-29, 1924, Christy finds the following item:

985. Thoreau (Henry D.) Manuscript Note Book, containing... Translations or portions of two French Works with his notes on the same... Closely written, in ink, on about 225 pages and consisting of approximately twenty eight thousand and two hundred words... Translations from the French: Portion of "Confucius et Mencius ... Traduit du Chinois. Par M.G. Pauthier." Written on 23 pages. Thoreau has translated many paragraphs, and interspersed are notes by Thoreau on the same...¹⁴

This item indisputably establishes the fact that Thoreau had a copy of *CONFUCIUS ET MENCIVS*, which was also translated by Pauthier and published in 1841, one year later than the publication of *LES LIVRES SACRES DE L'ORIENT*. Judging from what he had written and translated, Pauthier seemed to be interested in Taoism as well as Confucianism. Early in 1831 his *Memoire sur l'Origin et la Propagation de la Doctrine du Tao* was published by Librairie Orientale. It dealt with the connections between the pantheism of Laotse and the Kena and Isha Upanishads.¹⁵

Since Thoreau was able to obtain a copy of *Confucius et Mencius*, we can hardly deny the availability of this earlier book to him. Pauthier's first translation from the Chinese classics was *LE TA HIO* (THE GREAT LEARNING,) one of THE FOUR BOOKS. It was published on October 30, 1837 with the following advertisement on its fly-leaf:

LE TAO-TE-KING, OU LE LIVRE DE LA RAISON SUPREME ET DE VERTU, par Lao-Tseu, traduit en francias, et publie pour la premiere fois en Europe, avec one version latine et le texte chinois en regard; accompagne de Commentaire complet de Sie-Hoei, d'origine occidentale. etc.; in 8°; paraissant par livraisons. [The TAO TEH CHING, OR THE BOOK OF SUPREME REASON AND VIRTUE, by Laotse, translated into French, and published for the first time in Europe, with a Latin version and the Chinese text for reference; accompanied with the complete commentary by Hsi Ho, its Western origin, etc.; in 8°; appears by volume.]

13. Lyman V. Cady, "Thoreau's Quotations from the Confucian Books in Walden," *American Literature* (March 1961), page 21. But Cady's information is not very accurate. The first edition of *LES LIVRES SACRES DE L'ORIENT* was published in 1840, not 1841. See the imprint of the book.

14. Arthur Christy, *THE ORIENT IN AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM*, page 276

15. The information is obtained from the card catalogue of Sinclair Library, University of Hawaii. Unfortunately the book has been lost. In *THE WRITINGS OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU*, I, 141, [Henry Thoreau](#) writes, "'Assuredly,' says a French translator, speaking of the antiquity and durability of the Chinese and Indian nations, and the wisdom of their legislators, 'there are some vestiges of the eternal laws which govern the world.'" It would be very valuable if I could find Thoreau's quotation in the above-cited work.



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN

A note in the colophon says that the second volume of *TAO-TE-KING* is in the press. According to the advertisement, the first volume should be available in 1837. The date of publication I find from the imprint of the actual book, however, is 1838. This indicates that the first volume of *LE TAO-TE-KING* probably appeared early that year.

This size of Laotse's BOOK OF *TAO* is small, but it is known for its depth and obscurity. It has been usually divided into eighty-one chapters, with approximately ten lines in each chapter. Pauthier planned to translate the Book of *TAO* in six volumes.¹⁶ His first volume contains only nine chapters, which, as a matter of fact, consist of only 77 lines. Yet the book has 80 pages. What, then, is in it? At a glance one will find that the book is a hodgepodge. The Latin translation in verse form, the French prose rendering, and the original Chinese text constitute only a small portion of the book, while the commentaries by Hsi Ho and various other Chinese scholars, the explications of the commentaries provided by the translator, every sentence of which is followed by a French translation, serve, in my opinion, not to enlighten but to confuse his readers.

I have described Pauthier's *TAO-TE-KING* in detail because I strongly suspect that Thoreau might have read this book. On January 29, 1841 Thoreau writes:

If I make a huge effort to expose my innermost and richest wares to light, my counter seems cluttered with the meanest homemade stuffs; but after months or years I may discover the wealth of India, and whatever rarity is brought overland from Cathay, in that confused heap, and what perhaps seemed a festoon of dried apple or pumpkin will prove a string of Brazilian diamonds, or pearls from Corormandel [J. I., 182 1, 182].

I have pondered over the words "whatever rarity is brought overland from Cathay, in that confused heap" for a considerable time. but I cannot find any other translations from the Chinese better qualified for such a description than Pauthier's *TAO-TE-KING*. For one thing. the Confucian classics were as a whole better known and better translated. They were neither a rarity, nor a confused heap. For another, the *TAO-TE-KING* was brought to Concord via France from China, published in Europe for the first time and indeed a confused heap.

16. M.G. Pauthier, *LE TAO-TE-KING*, colophon



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN

Furthermore, there is another piece of indirect evidence in support of my supposition that Thoreau may have read Laotse. On June 26, 1840 and in a single day, Thoreau put down seven paradoxes in his journal, all of which bear close resemblance to Laotse. For the convenience of comparison, I will list them in numerical order. Here are Thoreau's:

- (1) The highest condition of art is artlessness.
- (2) Truth is always paradoxical.
- (3) He will get to the goal first who stands stillest.
- (4) There is one let better than any help, and that is, - Let-alone.
- (5) By sufferance you may escape suffering.
- (6) He who resists not at all will never surrender.
- (7) Stand outside the wall, and no harm can reach you. The danger is that you be walled in with it [J, I, 153].

The following paradoxes are from Laotse's book:

- (1) The greatest skill appears like clumsiness (Chapter XLV, Line 6).
- (2) Truth sounds like its opposite (LXXVII, 13).
- (3) The sage puts himself last / And finds himself in the foremost place (VII, 5-6).
- (4) By action without deeds / May all live in peace (III, 14-15).
- (5) To yield is to be preserved whole (XXII, 1).
- (6) Is it not because he does not live for Self / That his Self is realized (VII, 9-10)?
- (7) The sage regards his body as accidental, / And his body is therefore preserved [VII, 7-8]¹⁷

One may, of course, argue that some of these paradoxes are fairly simple homespun-isms in both Thoreau and Laotse, and that two persons may occasionally write in exactly the same vein. But the chances for an author to write seven unrelated paradoxes which correspond exactly to another's are too slim indeed.

17. All the above selections are taken from [Lin Yu-t'ang's](#) THE WISDOM OF LAOTSE except (2), which is taken from John C.H. Wu, translation, [TAO TEH CHING](#), page 111.



In addition, the Book of *TAO* has many rhymed sentences.¹⁸ In Chapter VI of *TAO-TE-KING* Pauthier calls his reader's attention to the fact that *Lao-tseu, dans la plus grande partie de son livre, a employe des rines ou consonnances finales.*¹⁹ [Laotse, in the greater part of his book, employs rhymes and final consonances.] It is interesting to find that, just two days before he put down his paradoxes, Thoreau had the following entry in his journal:

There is no doubt but the highest morality in the books is rhymed or measured. – is, in form as well as substance, poetry. Such is the scripture of all nations. If I were to compile a volume to contain the condensed wisdom of mankind, I should quote no rhymeless line [J, 1, 151].

When Thoreau speaks of the scriptures of the nations, he more often than not has those of the Chinese in mind. Once he even maintains that he is better acquainted with those of the Hindoos, the Chinese. and the Persians, than of the Hebrews.²⁰ Now what makes Thoreau assert confidently that the scripture of all nations "Is rhymed or measured," is, in form as well as substance, poetry?" As we know, the Confucian classics were written in prose. And to the best of my knowledge. no translator has ever attempted to versify them. Had Thoreau only known The Four Books, without any knowledge that the greater part of the Book of *TAO* is rhymed, it is not impossible that the wording of the above entry might have been otherwise.

While I believe that Thoreau had very probably read Laotse, I am not sure whether he had read Chuangtse or not, though one can almost say that to know Laotse is to know Chuangtse, for no traditional study on Laotse has ever been made without referring to Chuangtse. Nevertheless, it is curious to find that there are more affinities between Thoreau and Chuangtse than there are between Thoreau and Laotse.

The basic teachings of Laotse and Chuangtse were almost the same. Yet, as Lin Yutang has succinctly pointed out, there were also differences.²¹ First, the fundamental teaching of Laotse was humility. He often praised the virtue of gentleness, resignation, non-contention and the wisdom of lying low. Chuangtse, on the other hand, was inclined to speak of the virtue of quiescence, of keeping and preserving men's spiritual power through tranquillity and rest. Therefore, while Laotse regarded water, the softest of all substances, as a symbol of the wisdom of seeking lowly places, Chuangtse often compared it to the tranquillity of the mind and clarity of spirit: "Calm represents the nature of water at its best. In that it may serve as our model, for its power is preserved and is not dispersed through agitation."²²

18. On the subject of rhyming in Laotse, Bernhard Karlgren has a special treatise entitled THE POETICAL PARTS IN LAO-TSI, Goteborg, 1932.

19. M.G. Pauthier, *LE TAO-TE-KING*, page 58

20. THE WRITINGS OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU, 20 volumes (Boston and New York, 1906). 1, 72. Later references to this edition will be indicated in parentheses in the text.

21. [Lin Yu-t'ang](#), THE WISDOM OF LAOTSE, pages 10-11

22. [Lin Yu-t'ang](#), THE WISDOM OF LAOTSE, page 77



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN

In another instance, Chuangtse likened the mind of the perfect man to a mirror: "The mind of the perfect man is like a mirror. It does not move with things, nor does it anticipate them. It responds to things, but does not retain them. Therefore, he is able to deal successfully with things, but is not affected."²³ In like manner. Thoreau wrote of Walden symbolically:

Walden is a perfect mirror ... Nations come and go without defiling it. It is a mirror which no stone can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off, whose gilding Nature continually repairs; no storms, no dust, can dim its surface ever fresh; - a mirror in which all impurity presented to it sinks, swept and dusted by the sun's hazy brush, - this the light dust-cloth, - which retains no breath that is breathed on it, but sends its own to float as clouds high above its surface, and he reflected in its bosom still [W, 11, 209].

On the surface, this passage is a beautiful description of the pond. But when we look beneath, we shall find that the limpidity of its water is intended to signify the transparency of Thoreau's character.

Second, while Laotse advocated contentment, Chuangtse repeatedly taught men to free themselves and to roam in the metaphysical sphere, the realm above physical things, so as to enjoy life. Laotse says:

There is no greater curse than the lack of contentment.
No greater sin than the desire for possession.²⁴

Chuangtse, perhaps because of his temperament, seldom preached contentment. Even the two lines which Lin Yutang ransacked from the entire works of Chuangtse and regarded as an advice on contentment may be interpreted in a different way. The lines run as follows:

"The tit, building its nest in the mighty forest, occupies but a single twig. The beaver slakes its thirst from the river, but drinks enough only to fill its belly."²⁵

To my mind, the main idea of the above lines is that the necessary of life, to use Thoreau's words, is so little and nature is so abundant that man should be able to live according to his own will. This idea was expressed by Thoreau in a remarkably similar way:

"To the bison of the prairie it is a few inches of palatable grass, with water to drink; unless he seeks shelter of the forest or the mountain's shadow" (W, II, 13).

23. Fung Yu-lan, translation, *CHUANG TZU*, page 141

24. [Lin Yu-t'ang](#), *THE WISDOM OF LAOTSE*, page 225

25. [Lin Yu-t'ang](#), *THE WISDOM OF LAOTSE*, pages 226-7



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN

What, then, concerned Chuangtse most? It was the enjoyment of life – the recurrent theme in Chuangtse as well as in Thoreau's *Walden*. Not unlike Thoreau, he felt sorry for "the mass of men" who "lead lives of quiet desperation" and said:

"To labour without ceasing all life, and then, without living to enjoy the fruit, worn out with labor, to depart, one knows not whither, - is not this a just cause for grief?"²⁶

Oddly enough, Thoreau wrote practically in the same way:

"Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be picked by them" (*W*, II, 5).

Third, Thoreau and Chuangtse are especially alike in their love of roaming. Both of them are great lovers of nature. The first chapter of Chuangtse is significantly entitled "Hsiao Yao Yu" which in English means "The Happy Excursion," or "Free and Easy Wandering."²⁷ The chapter consists of several parables, the first of which relates the flight of an enormous bird called P'eng:

Therefore when the P'eng rises ninety thousand li, he must have the wind under him like that. Only then can he mount on the back of the wind, should the blue sky, and nothing can hinder or block him. Only then can he set his eyes to the south. The cicada and the little dove laugh at this, saying, "When we make an effort and fly up, we can get as far as the elm or the sapanwood tree, but sometimes we don't make it and just fall down on the ground. Now how is anyone going to go ninety thousand li to the south!"²⁸

It is of interest to quote a passage from *Walden* for comparison here:

"The migrating buffalo, who seeks new pastures in another latitude, is not extravagant like the cow which kicks over the pail, leaps the cowyard fence, and runs after her calf, in milking time" (*W*, II. 357).

26. [Lin Yu-t'ang](#), ed., *THE WISDOM OF CHINA AND INDIA*, page 635

27. These are translations by Fung Yu-lan and Burton Watson.

28. Burton Watson, translation, *CHUANG TZU*, pages 23-30



Notice how close the parallelism is! The only difference is that while Chuangtse used the migrating P'eng in contrast with the domestic dove and cicada, Thoreau compared the migrating buffalo with the cow. Their basic ideas are completely the same. Furthermore, Chuangtse used the word "yu," which means to roam, to saunter, or to wander, very frequently throughout his book. Here is how he wrote of himself:

"Above, his spirit wanders with the Creator, and below he makes friends with those who transcend life and death and beginning and end."²⁹

In other words, to yu is to identify himself with Tao, to be in rapport with nature. Thoreau also felt the need to re-ally himself with nature each day. He was so fond of the outdoors that he would often go out walking for miles in the severe winter. R.L. Cook is certainly perceptive in calling Thoreau "an indigene of field and woods."³⁰ The epithet, to my mind, can also be appropriately applied to Chuangtse. Self-revealingly Chuangtse once said,

"A pheasant of the marshes may have to go ten steps to get a peck, a hundred to a get drink. Yet pheasants do not want to be fed in a cage. For although they might have less worries, they would not like it."³¹

In the same manner Thoreau wrote,

"Shall I transplant the primrose by the river's brim, to set it beside its sister on the mountain? This was the sod it grew in, this the hour it bloomed in. If sun, wind, and rain came here to cherish and expand it, shall not we come here to pluck it? Shall we require it to grow in a conservatory for our convenience?" (J, 1, 200).

If I were asked to describe these two nature mystics in their own terms. I would unhesitatingly name Chuangtse "a pheasant of the marshes," and Thoreau "the primrose by the river's brim." Another profound similarity between Thoreau and Taoism was their love of the simple and primitive, the corollary of which was distaste for conventions and governmental interference. The Book of [Tao](#) was probably man's first articulate protest against excessive organization and mechanization. Laotse says:

When the government is lazy and dull, Its people are unspoiled; When the government is efficient and smart, Its people are discontented.³²

29. [Lin Yu-t'ang](#), THE WISDOM OF LAOTSE, page 34

30. R.L. Cook, [The Concord Saunterer](#), page 8

31. [Lin Yu-t'ang](#), THE WISDOM OF CHINA AND INDIA, page 664

32. [Lin Yu-t'ang](#), THE WISDOM OF LAOTSE, page 266



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN

His advice to the rulers was "Rule a big country as you would fry small fish."³³ because if you do not let it alone, the fish will become paste by constant turning about. Chuangtse was of the same opinion. He regarded the so-called sages as trouble-makers. Only when the sages are dead, will the gangsters cease to appear and the empire rest in peace.³⁴ So was Thoreau. In his "Civil Disobedience" Thoreau unequivocally states that he would heartily accept the motto, "That government is best which governs least." And he even went on to say that he believed "That government is best which governs not at all." His attitude towards so-called sages was not less hostile than that of Chuangtse. To Thoreau's mind, "our manners have been corrupted by communication with the saints," because "they had rather consoled the fears than confirmed the hopes of man" (W, II, 87). Thoreau's pacifism also bears unmistakable resemblance to Chuangtse. Chuangtse's parable which demonstrates the folly of war is worth noting. When the prince of Wei was about to stage a war against the state of Ch'i Tai Chin-jen, a wise man, was received in audience: "There is a creature called a snail," said Tai Chin-jen. "Does your Highness know what I mean?" "I do," replied the prince. "There is a kingdom on its left horn," continued Tai Chin-jen, "ruled over by Aggression, and another on its right horn, ruled over by Violence. These two rulers are constantly fighting for territory. In such cases, corpses lie about by thousands, and one party will pursue the other for fifteen days before returning." "Whew!" cried the prince. "Surely you are joking." "Sire," replied Tai Chin-jen, "I beg you to regard it as fact. Does your Highness recognize any limit to space?" "None," said the prince. "It is boundless." "When, therefore," continued Tai Chin-jen, "the mind descends from the contemplation of boundless space to the contemplation of a kingdom with fixed boundaries, that kingdom must seem to be of dimensions infinitesimally small?" "Of course," replied the prince. "Well then," said Tai Chin-jen, "in a kingdom with fixed boundaries there is the Wei State. In the Wei State there is the city of Liang. In the city of Liang there is a prince. In what does that prince differ from Violence?" "There is no difference," said the prince. Thereupon Tai Chin-jen took his leave, and the prince remained in a state of mental perturbation, as though he had lost something.³⁵ Readers of Thoreau will naturally perceive that there are similarities between the war of the two horns and the battle of the ants in Chapter XII of Walden, especially the mock heroic touch. In addition, there is a passage in Walden comparable to Tai Chin-jen's words: As I stand over the insect crawling amid the pine needles on the forest floor, and endeavoring to conceal itself from my sight, and ask myself why it will cherish those humble thoughts, and hide its head from me who might, perhaps, be its benefactor, and impart to its race some cheering information, I am reminded of the greater Benefactor and Intelligence that stands over me the human insect [W, 11, 365].

33. [Lin Yu-t'ang](#), THE WISDOM OF LAOTSE, page 277

34. [Lin Yu-t'ang](#), THE WISDOM OF LAOTSE, page 123

35. Herbert A. Giles, translation, *CHUANG TZU*, pages 51-2



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN

It is really remarkable that both Thoreau and Chuangtse were able to detach themselves and look upon themselves as human insects. It seems to me that their way of thinking and their way of writing were in the same track.

One of the most surprising affinities between Thoreau and Chuangtse is in their style. Chuangtse, in my opinion as well as in many Chinese critics, is the greatest prose master of ancient China. His prose is so beautiful that no one can justifiably disagree with Lin Yutang's eulogy, "What was philosophy in Laotse became poetry in Chuangtse."³⁶ And most modern critics of Thoreau, I believe, will agree with Sherman Paul that Thoreau is "a poet of experience, one who knew well the uses of imagination and of art."³⁷ But the stylistic parallels between these two prose masters are so numerous that it is far beyond the scope of this paper to discuss them in detail. One prominent feature of their style should, however, be mentioned here. That is their employment of parables and every variety of symbolic statement. Thoreau deeply felt the inadequacy of words and wanted "to speak somewhere without bounds" (W, II, 357), and "to link" his "facts to fable" (W, II, 204). So did Chuangtse. Once Chuangtse said, "The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you've gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?"³⁸ In view of their striking affinities, I am sure Thoreau was the man for whom he was looking and with whom he could have a word.

36. [Lin Yu-t'ang](#), THE WISDOM OF LAOTSE, page 11

37. Sherman Paul, ed., THOREAU: A COLLECTION OF CRITICAL ESSAYS, page 4

38. Burton Watson, translation, *CHUANG TZU*, page 140



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN

The last parallel between Thoreau and Chuangtse that I want to point out is concerning the parable of the artist of Kouroo. According to Sherman Paul the parable "was obviously his own work, full of revisions, with his characteristic pun (lapse and elapsed), with transparent personal allusions such as the desertion of his friends."³⁹ But the first time I read this passage, it struck me that I had read something very similar before. And to my surprise. I find it in the nineteenth chapter of Chuangtse. In order to show their structural, and sometimes even verbal parallelism, I will quote both parables in their entirety:

There was an artist in the city of Kouroo who was disposed to strive after perfection. One day it came into his mind to make a staff. Having considered that in an imperfect work time is an ingredient, but into a perfect work time does not enter, he said to himself, It shall be perfect in all respects, though I should do nothing else in my life. He proceeded instantly to the forest for wood, being resolved that it should not be made of unsuitable material; and as he searched for and rejected stick after stick, his friends gradually deserted him, for they grew old in their works and died, but he grew not older by a moment. His singleness of purpose and resolution, and his elevated piety, endowed him, without his knowledge, with perennial youth. As he made no compromise with Time, Time kept out of his way, and only sighed at a distance because he could not overcome him. Before he had found a stock in all respects suitable the city of Kouroo was a hoary ruin, and he sat on one of its mounds to peel the stick. Before he had given it the proper shape the dynasty of the Candahars was at an end, and with the point of the stick he wrote the name of the last of that race in the sand, and then resumed his work. By the time he had smoothed and polished the staff Kalpa was no longer the pole-star; and ere he had put on the ferule and the head adorned with precious stones, Brahma had awoken and slumbered many times. But why do I stay to mention these things? When the finishing stroke was put to his work, it suddenly expanded before the eyes of the astonished artist into the fairest of all the creations of Brahma. He had made a new system in making a staff, a world with full and fair proportions; in which, though the old cities and dynasties had passed away, fairer and more glorious ones had taken their places. And now he saw by the heap of shavings still fresh at his feet, that, for him and his work, the former lapse of time had been illusion, and that no more time had elapsed than is required for a single scintillation from the brain of Brahma to fall on and inflame the tinder of a mortal brain. The material was pure, and his art was pure; how could the result be other than wonderful? [W, II, 359-360] Ch'ing, the chief carpenter, was carving wood into a stand for hanging musical instruments. When finished,

39. Sherman Paul, THE SHORES OF AMERICA, page 353



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN

the work appeared to those who saw it as though of supernatural execution. And the prince of Lu asked him, saying, "What mystery is there in your art?" "No mystery, your Highness," replied Ch'ing; "and yet there is something. When I am about to make such a stand, I guard against any diminution of my vital power. I first reduce my mind to absolute quiescence. Three days in this condition and I become oblivious of any reward to be gained. Five days, and I become oblivious of any fame to be acquired. Seven days, and I become unconscious of my four limbs and my physical frame. Then, with no thought of the Court present to my mind, my skill becomes concentrated, and all disturbing elements from without are gone. I enter some mountain forest. I search for a suitable tree. It contains the form required, which is afterwards elaborated. I see the stand in my mind's eye, and then set to work. Otherwise, there is nothing. I bring my natural capacity into relation with that of the wood. What was suspected to be of supernatural execution was due solely to this."⁴⁰

A word can be added here. The theme that singleness of purpose will result in perfection of art is a commonplace in Chuangtse. Although my findings are sufficient to convince myself that Thoreau must, in one way or another, have been acquainted with Taoism, the spirit of scholarship keeps me from making an absolutely positive conclusion. I hope this paper of mine will give some stimulus to scholars who are interested in Thoreau and Taoism in their further research so that one day whether Taoism is one of Thoreau's sources can be established. For the time being, for want of a better peroration, I can only conclude that, like the transmigration of the seven Brahmans, Chuangtse had transmigrated and become Thoreau, and had "preserved in this existence the remembrance of the past."⁴¹

40. Herbert A. Giles, translation, *CHUANG TZU*, pages 240-1

41. [Henry Thoreau](#), translation, *THE TRANSMIGRATION OF THE SEVEN BRAHMANS*, page 4



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

1838

[M.J. Pauthier](#) translated the *TAO TÊ CHING* into French.⁴²

LIGHT FROM CHINA

TAOISM

1840

June 26, Friday: [David T.Y. Ch'en](#) has become convinced on the basis of research into the 19th-Century availability of translations from the [Chinese](#), and on the basis of detective work among several strands of converging internal evidence, and on the basis of a series of seven paradoxes written into Thoreau's journal on this day, that our guy had just been perusing one or another of the translations of [Lao-tze](#), most likely the one by [M.J. Pauthier](#). Do any changes or developments in [Henry Thoreau](#)'s patterns of thought hinge on this period?⁴³

THOREAU AND CHINA

There is a [Taoist](#) concept, *tzu-jan*, that we ought to be investigating in connection with research into such "Thoreauvian" attitudes. It is that ideal state of human existence which would proceed from a life which, because wholly spontaneous, would be in complete harmony with all the realities of nature. This world is constantly being made and unmade and made and unmade, therefore we should offer no resistance whatever to the process of making and unmaking. Question: what would be the primary [Chinese](#) sources in which we should study such an attitude, and when did these sources become available in the Western world which Thoreau inhabited? Question: To what extent was [Lin Yu-t'ang](#)'s endorsement of [Thoreau](#) as Chinese in his writing and in his thought processes merely an identification of Thoreauvianism with this sort of *tzu-jan*ism?



June 26: The best poetry has never been written, for when it might have been, the poet forgot it, and when it was too late remembered it — or when it might have been, the poet remembered it, and when it was too late forgot it.

42. Lyman V. Cady's inference that [Henry Thoreau](#) could not have encountered Taoism, based as it was on incomplete evidence about the sorts of Taoist reading material available in Indo-European languages during Thoreau's lifetime, must now be subjected to reexamination. A Latin version of the *TAO TÊ CHING* would be created by Jesuits, and two German translations would appear, during the 1840s. These were all, of course, languages that Thoreau could read. [David T.Y. Ch'en](#) has become convinced on the basis of new evidence of the 19th-Century availability of such translations, and on the basis of detective work among several strands of converging internal evidence, and on the basis of a series of seven paradoxes written into Thoreau's journal on June 26, 1840, that Thoreau had as of that date just been perusing one or another of the translations of [Lao-tze](#), most likely this one by Pauthier. — For more information, refer to that entry for June 26, 1840.

CHINA

THOREAU AND CHINA



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN

The highest condition of art is artlessness.

Truth is always paradoxical.

He will get to the goal first who stands stillest.

There is one let better than any help –and that is –Let-alone.

By sufference you may escape suffering.

He who resists not at all will never surrender.

When a dog runs at you whistle for him.

Say –not so –and you will outcircle the philosophers.

Stand outside the wall and no harm can reach you — the danger is that you will be walled in with it.

43. “Thoreau and Taoism,” pages 410-11: We must also ask ourselves questions about possible readings of translations of Chuang-tze for, according to [Ch'en](#)'s reading, [Thoreau](#)'s personality was more like Chuang-tze's than like [Lao-tze](#)'s. Ch'en notes



that there are more affinities between Thoreau and Chuangtse than there are between Thoreau and Laotse.... [T]he fundamental teaching of Laotse was humility. He often praised the virtue of gentleness, resignation, non-contention and the wisdom of lying low. Chuangtse, on the other hand, was inclined to speak of the virtue of quiescence, of keeping and preserving men's spiritual power through tranquility and rest. Therefore, while Laotse regarded water, the softest of all substances, as a symbol of the wisdom of seeking lowly places, Chuangtse often compared it to the tranquility of the mind and clarity of spirit: "Calm represents the nature of water at its best. In that it may serve as our model, for its power is preserved and is not dispersed through agitation." In another instance, Chuangtse likened the mind of the perfect man to a mirror: "The mind of the perfect man is like a mirror. It does not move with things, nor does it anticipate them. It responds to things, but does not retain them. Therefore, he is able to deal successfully with things, but is not affected." In like manner, Thoreau wrote of Walden symbolically: "Walden is a perfect mirror.... Nations come and go without defiling it. It is a mirror which no stone can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off, whose gilding Nature continually repairs; no storms, no dust, can dim its surface ever fresh; –a mirror in which all impurity presented to it sinks, swept and dusted by the sun's hazy brush, –this the light dust-cloth, –which retains no breath that is breathed on it, but sends its own to float as clouds high above its surface, and be reflected in its bosom still." On the surface, this passage is a beautiful description of the pond. But when we look beneath, we shall find that the limpidity of its water is intended to signify the transparency of Thoreau's character.

(After becoming aware that Thoreau retained this perspective, unchanged, for the remainder of his short life, we may wonder when this perspective developed, and from whom he “absorbed” it.)



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN

1920

[David T.Y. Ch'en](#) was born in [Shanghai, China](#).

1951

[David T.Y. Ch'en](#), who had received a BA at Chien Tung University in [Shanghai, China](#), at this point was awarded an MBA by the Wharton School of Business of the University of Pennsylvania.

1972

[David T.Y. Ch'en](#). "Thoreau and Taoism" in Narasimhaiah, C.D., ed., 1972, ASIAN RESPONSE TO AMERICAN LITERATURE, Vikas Publications, Delhi, India, pages 406-16

THOREAU AND CHINA



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN

1980

April: John Emerson pointed out in “Thoreau’s Construction of Taoism,” in the Thoreau Quarterly Journal (Volume 12, Number 2, pages 5-14) that [David T.Y. Ch’en](#) in his 1972 study “Thoreau and Taoism” had failed to establish not only that Thoreau had seen the 1838 rendition of the *TAO TÊ CHING* of [Lao-tze](#) into French, but even so much as that **any copy** of this book ever had made its way to America, or that **any American** had ever

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perused it. He chooses to emphasize the other possibility, that Thoreau came up with his [Taoist](#) ideas by personal inspiration and by life situation rather than by the reading of prior writings: “Taoism did not come to Thoreau, and what we must in the end try to understand is why Thoreau was looking so hard for Taoism.... To explain Thoreau’s convergence to Taoism ... the key is the closing off of public life.” The essence of this 1980 argument by Emerson is the same as the essence of Chen’s 1972 argument, that is to say, each author has presumed that because it may have happened one way, it is likelier that it happened that way. Chen presumed that Thoreau **could** have seen a translation of Taoist writings from the [Chinese](#) script into a Western script and that therefore he **presumably did** see that translation. Emerson presumed that Thoreau **could** have come up with these Taoist-like thoughts on his own and therefore he **presumably did** come up with these thoughts on his own. In neither case, it would seem, has the research as yet been attempted which would resolve this scripture-vs-inspiration dispute.

THOREAU AND CHINA

2004

November 27: The columnist Art Carey, in a column entitled “Inside Out: Chopping firewood brings him warmth inside and out” in the Philadelphia Enquirer, averred that: “Thoreau once said that wood warms you twice — once when you split it, again when you burn it.”

The Thoreau scholar [David T.Y. Ch’en](#) died peacefully at the age of 84 in his home in Great Neck, New York. He was survived by his wife Evelyn H. Chen, sons Stephen and Timothy, and daughter Esther.



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN

2007

Winter: Linda Brown Holt's "[Chinese](#) Philosophy in America: How It Influenced H.D. Thoreau" appeared in the [Qi Journal](#).⁴⁴

READ THE FULL TEXT

TAOISM

44. "Linda Brown Holt is an independent scholar in the field of comparative religious literature, and graduate faculty mentor and capstone coordinator with Thomas Edison State College. Author of the book VIEWING MEISTER ECKHART THROUGH THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Holt has written articles that appeared in [The New York Times](#), [Qi Journal](#), [Yoga Journal](#), [Liberal Education](#), [The Empty Vessel](#) and other publications. She is the author of chapters in the books LETTING GO: LIVING WITHOUT A NET and SEEING THROUGH SYMBOLS: INSIGHTS INTO SPIRIT, both published by Swedenborg Foundation Publishers. She has lectured on distance learning and communicating with adult students at the University of Vienna, Charles University in Prague and the University of Innsbruck. Author of THE LILAC THIEF, a collection of poetry, she has published two novels under a penname, one of which has been translated into Spanish (search "Tigre Blanco") and published by Ediciones La Llave (<http://www.edicioneslallave.com/>). She holds an earned Doctor of Letters degree focusing on comparative religious literature from Drew University, an M.A. from California State University-Dominguez Hills and a B.A. with honors from Rider University. She is a liberal Christian by religion, a Western Daoist by inclination and a student of classical Yoga and Vedanta for more than 40 years, and is a huge fan of H.D. Thoreau."



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN



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"It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."

- Remark by character "Garin Stevens"
in William Faulkner's INTRUDER IN THE DUST



Prepared: November 13, 2013

ARRGH AUTOMATED RESEARCH REPORT
GENERATION HOTLINE



This stuff presumably looks to you as if it were generated by a human. Such is not the case. Instead, upon someone's request we have pulled it out of the hat of a pirate that has grown out of the shoulder of our pet parrot "Laura" (depicted above). What these chronological lists are: they are research reports compiled by ARRGH algorithms out of a database of data modules which we term the Kouroo Contexture. This is data mining. To respond to such a request for information, we merely push a button.



DAVID T.Y. CHEN

DAVID T.Y. CHEN

Commonly, the first output of the program has obvious deficiencies and so we need to go back into the data modules stored in the contexture and do a minor amount of tweaking, and then we need to punch that button again and do a recompile of the chronology – but there is nothing here that remotely resembles the ordinary “writerly” process which you know and love. As the contents of this originating contexture improve, and as the programming improves, and as funding becomes available (to date no funding whatever has been needed in the creation of this facility, the entire operation being run out of pocket change) we expect a diminished need to do such tweaking and recompiling, and we fully expect to achieve a simulation of a generous and untiring robotic research librarian. Onward and upward in this brave new world.

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Arrgh.