

Based on Returning to My Farm to Walden to Analyze the Hermit Culture in Chinese and West

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ABSTRACT

Highly developed science and technology are used as tools to liberate people from heavy manual labor. But with the haze of war and economic depression, the original moral system is on the verge of collapsing. What's worse, People is assimilated by machines and is losing their uniqueness as human beings. Given this, the twentieth century is an era of loss of faith and some people have returned to nature to find the paradise they hoped for, and the legendary hermit culture has re-entered people's field of vision and research. This article compares the literary work of Tao Yuanming and Thoreau, two representatives of Chinese and Western hermit cultures, and finds that the Chinese and Western hermit cultures have the same philosophical foundation. What the hermits pursue is not to gain fame and fortune by means of retreat, but to search for the identity of self-worth in nature.

Keywords: *Hermit culture, Confucianism, Taoism, Tao Yuanming, Thoreau*

1. INTRODUCTION

“Entering officialdom” or “hermit” is always the eternal multiple-choice questions in life no matter in China or the West, and the expression of darkness and struggle in reality through the choice of seclusion has become a unique theme of Chinese and Western hermit literature. Suffering from the scheming against colleagues in the officialdom, Tao Yuanming and Thoreau selected to return to the pastoral life. It was during this pastoral period that they created these two masterpieces *Returning to My Farm* and *Walden* respectively. In the works of the two writers, not only the amazing rural life is conveyed to readers, but also their natural philosophy. The six sets of poems in *Returning to My Farm* are written by Tao Yuanming, one of the famous hermits during the Wei-jin period of China, Tao returned to the pastoral fields after a life of uncertainty. Surrounded by natural mountains and rivers, the poet takes natural scenery as the main object of expression, presents the unfinished beauty of nature to readers, and conveys his attitude towards life and a free and easy way of life after the struggle for officialdom and power. Henry David Thoreau, second only to Emerson as a 19th-century American transcendentalist thinker, wrote his masterpiece, *Walden*, about his time spent in seclusion on the shores of Walden Lake near Concord between 1845 and 1847. In Thoreau's writing,

man and nature converge as one, and his descriptions of natural scenes are delicate and realistic, reflecting the theme of man's contemplation of nature.

This article intends to use parallel research methods to analyze one of Tao Yuanming's *Returning to My Farm* and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* to explain the seclusion culture produced under the different cultural backgrounds of China and the West. The display of interest in pastoral life in Chinese and Western literary works shows the author's spirit of seclusion that is not restricted by the material basis, and also reflects the duality of the human inner world. In the choice between becoming official and hiding, people begin to return to their original minds, reflect on the constraints brought about by material desires and finally regain the peace and tranquility of their souls. In this regard, the Chinese and Western hermit cultures reach the same goal by different routes, and their ultimate positive significance lies in the construction of harmony and tacit understanding between man and self, man and nature, and man and society. Recalling the hermit culture today is not about advocating negative retreat, or advocating the opposite of estrangement from the mainstream society, but reminding the world to pay attention to their own hearts. In the face of materialistic reality, don't be tempted by the material to lose yourself, but return to nature to pursue the true meaning of life.

2. REASONS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF HERMIT

Literally speaking, the hermit culture refers to a social and cultural phenomenon that accompanies the emergence of this special group of hermits. The hermit culture in China has a long history and can be traced back to Xu You, Chaofu, etc. who showed their noble aspirations in seclusion without being noble and thus opened the precedent of the ancient Chinese hermit culture. However, it is difficult to inherit the hermit culture for thousands of years by relying on individual cases. Behind the culture is the practice pursued by the scholars, and the hermit is the manifestation of this practice. The hermit's act of recluse is not just to simply escape from the present world, but it is more likely to express hermits emotions and pursuits through this behavior, and to use literary creation to externalize them, thus transmitting to the world a kind of natural and the pursuit of self.

The status of hermit culture in China is beyond reproach, and it is an indispensable and essential part of Chinese culture. However, the hermit culture is not unique to China. From some perspectives, it is shared by the world, providing convincing proof that Chinese and Western cultures have common characteristics. The hermit's focus on the inner self and the pursuit of not being trapped by power have something in common with the Western Renaissance. Thinkers began to pay attention to the problems of people and themselves and began to pursue the spirit of free humanism to resist the excessive restriction and intervention of Christian theology in the Middle Ages on human nature and behavior. When the capitalist society came, the social material foundation was highly developed in mechanized production. People were trapped by the temptation of external materials, gradually lost their faith, lost themselves, and neglected the inner world's pursuit of spiritual freedom. In the face of this social reality, some Western scholars began to propose the return to nature in the form of "seclusion" and a simple way of life, to achieve spiritual liberation.

3. THE DIFFERENCE OF HERMIT SHOWN IN RETURNING TO MY FARM TO WALDEN

3.1 Different reasons

In the Eastern Jin Dynasty, Tao Yuanming was the sect of hermit poets in ancient and modern times. [1]Faced with Tao's choice, readers couldn't help asking: Why did the poet return? And where did he come back? Thirty-eight hermits recorded in Jinshu·Hidden Biography: Seventeen of the hermits ceased to be official on the grounds of illness. Tao Yuanming also speaks of his frail health in the preface to his poem A

Reply to Adviser Pang, so it is clear that ailment was one of the reasons why Tao Yuanming stopped working as an official. At the same time, the poet responds further in Returning to My Fram: from the dusty net, he returns to the pastoral fields.

In the poem, the poet seems to have easily compared the thirteen years he spent as a government official between the ages of 29 and 41 to a "fall into a dusty net"[2], but it is easy for the reader to see the vicissitudes of the author's life during that time. Politics was extremely chaotic in the Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties. Politicians framed and killed each other for power. The ruling class formed parties for private gains. The contradictions between peasants and military officers were sharp. Tao Yuanming who was in between had a deep understanding of the dark and bloody social reality. Even though he was deeply influenced by the Confucian thought of "attainment is good for the world at the same time"[3], the thirteen years of unsuccessful service had already caused Tao Yuanming to lose confidence in his career. In addition, the physical burden caused by illness has made Tao Yuanming even more fatigue. "Poverty is good for itself"[3], this ideal naturally became Tao Yuanming's choice to conform to his heart.

The American transcendentalist writer Thoreau, as a representative of the Western hermits, was in the era of rapid development of capitalist material life, but he saw people indulging in material pursuits and forgetting the true meaning of life. To answer the question of why people live and how to live, he chose to find the answer through his practical actions and recorded it in the book Walden. Speaking of the reasons for his seclusion, Thoreau answered in chapter two of the book: Life is precious, and he does not want to be trapped by the material ties of life and waste his years. So he began to try to abandon all the burdens of material life and let life return to its original appearance. Thoreau also wants the answers he got through the experience of living in seclusion to inspire more people in the world to pay attention to his spirit and soul.[4]

It can be seen that, like Tao Yuanming, most Chinese retreat because they dislike the darkness of society and the ugliness of officialdom, so they either passively or actively choose to live in seclusion. But they often faintly express some kind of unsatisfactory and untimely sighs, such as Jiang Taigong, Zhuge Liang, and even Tao Yuanming, who is not bent over five buckets of rice, are very likely to give up and come back. Therefore, compared with Thoreau, most Chinese hermits represented by Tao Yuanming still have a difference between active and passive understanding of the issue of the hermit.

3.2 Different expression of rural life

Tao Yuanming, who grew up in the countryside since childhood, has a certain affinity for the rural life itself, so he spared no effort to exaggerate the natural and simple atmosphere in the countryside in his poem *Returning to My Farm*. The whole poem used the poet's return to the pastoral residence as the main body of the depiction, followed by the scene outside the thatched house as a foil. Two common pastoral sceneries, elm willow and peach, and plum are selected. Although they don't have any special features, the verdant green of the trees, the redness of the peach blossoms, and the color of the pear blossoms are like snow. They conflict with the rustic simplicity of the rural thatched house. Complementing each other is interesting, and you can also see the unique ingenuity of the poet's landscape painting. Later, I described the background map of the thatched house. Through the change of tone, the scene of swaying dynamic changes was outlined, and the life in the village was outlined in a few strokes, harmonious and full of vitality, quiet and full of fun. It is not difficult to see from this that everything in the village after the retreat is very beautiful in the eyes of the poet, and the scenery created in the pen also comes from the poet's unique inner feelings. Tao Yuanming's sketches are beautiful from the beginning to the end, in the fusion of emotion and scenery, they are presented without care, benefiting from the aesthetic experience brought to the poet by the reclusive life, and also reflecting the poet's leisurely and contented mental state.

As the first chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau also gave a detailed account of his simple life in the mountains and forests, just like Tao Yuanming. Through his experiments, he calculated a sum of gains and losses for the life of the world: a life planned as he did, only six weeks of labor a year. However, many people in society still regard the material gains as the standard of a good life. It is precisely under the misleading of this concept that people carry a heavy burden on their lives. Thoreau pointed out through practice: Those who are busy in pursuing the luxury with all their lives are very sad. A person's life should be regarded as an art, not a commodity. To satisfy the desire of greed and vanity, become a slave to the material, and lose the tranquility in life, leaving the soul nowhere to rest.

Just as people would always associate Tao Yuanming when it comes to the Peach Blossom Fountain, Thoreau and *Walden Lake* are also closely linked in people's minds. But, unlike Tao Yuanming who was forced to retreat to the countryside and regarded nature as his ultimate shelter, Thoreau did not intend to use the seclusion there as his life style from the beginning. He also judged that he was not a born hermit. Thoreau lived in seclusion on the *Walden Lake* for more than two years with a very clear purpose, and to explore

the most essential life. When he thinks that he has got the answer, the life at this stage also means the end for him, and he will set off to continue to explore the next life puzzle.

4. THE INFLUENCE OF CHINESE CLASSICAL CULTURE ON HERMITS

4.1 Influence shown in *Returning to My Farm*

The traditional Chinese thought of hermitage originated from the *Change* book, which pointed out that a gentleman can hide away from disasters at the right time if he has no alternative. It was very close to the Confucian view of hermitage represented by Confucius and Mencius, and was also mentioned by the poet in *Returning to My Farm*. And the experience of returning to the countryside after thirteen years in the official position corresponds to that. At the same time, metaphysics prevailed over the Jin Dynasty, and the style of study of Confucianism and Metaphysics became common, and the hermits showed a Confucianism and Taoism compatible ideology. The reason why Tao Yuanming became a representative of a generation of seclusion is mostly due to his rational transformation, innovation, and development of Confucianism and Taoism. Regarding the choice of the seclusion environment, he neither pursued the living environment of isolation advocated by Taoism nor did he choose the "great seclusion" promoted by Confucianism. Instead, he chose a peaceful and unique way of seclusion based on his actual situation. The countryside serves as a habitat for nourishing the soul. At the same time, he followed the way of life of Taoist pioneers such as Changju and Jiedu, working in the fields and making a living from farming. The idea of transforming real life has not been forgotten due to retreat. The poem, "Distant villages are lost in haze, above the houses smoke hangs in the air. A dog is barking somewhere at a hidden lane, a cock crows from the top of a mulberry tree." [2] is the ancient and simple society that the poet yearns for. Projecting the outline of the ideal of the Peach Blossom Fountain onto reality is a development of Taoism's thought of abandoning the sage, and it is also a transformation and innovation of the Confucian concept of putting people first and attaching importance to people's livelihood. Life in the countryside brought Tao Yuanming not only physical and mental tranquility but also provided a space for the practice of the concept of seclusion that he eventually formed.

4.2 Influence shown in *Walden*

As for Thoreau's thoughts embodied in *Walden*, some scholars pointed out that it was formed under the combined influence of the three philosophical thoughts of Puritanism, Romanticism and Transcendentalism. [5] Transcendentalism that emerged in the United States in

the 19th century is closely related to ancient Chinese sages. There are many books in Emerson's private collection that introduce Eastern thought. Under the influence of Emerson, Thoreau was also very likely to be exposed to Chinese classical philosophical thought. After reading and sorting out, it is not difficult to find that the Confucian classics such as *The Analects*, *Mencius*, and *The Daxue* are directly quoted more than ten times in the book *Walden*. For example, the first quotation of the Confucian classics in the book is "Be certain of what you know and don't pretend to know things you don't"[6], Thoreau uses Confucius's view of distinguishing between knowledge and ignorance to satirize the desperate people of the world. In his view, people are just chasing endless desires, so they would not understand the true meaning of life. The principle of "If you can try to make yourself with new ideas every day, and do it day by day you would have new ideas each day"[7] had been more profoundly understood in Thoreau's daily morning bathing meditation practice, and he had a more personal experience of the everlasting operation of the universe. Facing the phenomenon that people were keen to inquire about gossip and vulgar news at the time, Thoreau regarded Qu Boyu as a model and believed that citizens' continuous strengthening of their moral cultivation is of eternal significance. Until the end of *Walden*, Thoreau still quoted Confucius' words that "the chief commander of a state's army may be removed, but a true man cannot be robbed of his will" [8] to call on the world to continue to work hard and stick to their ideals in the poverty-stricken status quo. In Thoreau's eyes, although the Confucian sages speak the words of this foreign land, they are familiar with the content.

Not only the traditional Confucianism has been creatively used in *Walden*, but the Taoist ideas represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi are also embodied throughout the book. Taoist philosophy regards the universe as a vast and endless ecosystem. In this system, the changes of yin and yang and the operation of the four seasons all have their laws. As one of them, people should follow this law. This Taoist thought of following the laws of nature is embodied in the description of animals and plants in *Walden*. When Thoreau was rafting the *Walden* for the first time, the surrounding area was full of tall and lush pine and oak forests. However, since he left, the forest by the lake has been cut down wildly. Without the paths between the forests, it is no longer possible to see the lake water from the deep forest. Thoreau is keenly aware that the industrial civilization that has just begun global expansion has caused irreparable damage to the laws of nature, so he has issued the same call to respect nature as Taoists. At the same time, Thoreau held an attitude of equal sharing on the shore of *Walden Lake*, coexisting with the creatures around him, and did not separate himself from all things, or be superior to all things. He believes that

he and all things in nature form a complete whole, and he also agrees with the Taoist view that all things are not only equal but also spiritual.

5. CONCLUSION

As hermits, Tao Yuanming and Thoreau's choice of expression inevitably shows the negative side of hermit culture. Faced with the dark social reality, the choice of retreating into the mountains and forests has become a good way for them to escape responsibility. Seemingly far away from everything, hermits have no desire for material things, but just put on a high-sounding coat for his self-preservation behavior. Such an anti-mainstream negative orientation has brought a certain amount of disharmony to society, but it has also aroused widespread concern and reflection. It intrinsically advocates the harmonious coexistence relationship between man and himself, society and nature. To be further known to the public is also the positive meaning inherent in the hermit culture.

As mentioned above, it is not difficult to see that although the cultural phenomenon of "hermitage" has different budding backgrounds and philosophical foundations in China and the West, it is ultimately a common pursuit of mankind. What Tao Yuanming and Thoreau praised is not the way of life of people in primitive times, but they call on the world to be as loyal to their hearts and not to be burdened by materials. Such pursuits also exist in the construction of today's harmonious society. At the same time, the two hermits had a better understanding of the greatness of nature in their return live and penetrated it into every corner of the work. Later readers should better grasp their position in nature through the expositions in hermit literary works and re-establish their awe of nature. Only in this way can human beings face up to themselves, know how to introspect, have a deeper understanding of themselves and the world, and get along with nature more harmoniously.

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