

# Analysis of Similarities and Discrepancies Between Chinese and Western Hermits Based on Tao Yuanming and Thoreau

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**Abstract.** Throughout history, the word “hermit” has been a universal concept in both Chinese and western cultures. Chinese and western hermits keep harmony in diversity. To some extent, in terms of some core values, they step on the same paths. At the same time, differences also make them shine uniquely. In ancient societies and modern world, their simple lifestyle and unshakable pursuit of inner purification have inspired people to seek for the real themselves. Their great minds, unique attitudes towards life and extraordinary contributions have significantly promoted the fields of literature, arts and philosophy. This thesis takes Tao Yuanming and Henry David Thoreau, who were typical figures of hermits as main examples, uses a comparative analysis approach, shedding light on the similarities and discrepancies between Chinese and western hermits. Additionally, it provides suggestions on how to live peacefully and easily. In our modern society full of involution and competition, it is of great significance to learn, inherit and internalize the precious spirits, thoughts and ideas from hermits.

**Keywords:** Comparison, Chinese Hermits, Western Hermits, Tao Yuanming, Thoreau

## 1. Introduction of Hermits

### 1.1. A Brief Introduction of Chinese Hermits

Seclusion is a unique and significant way of existence, life philosophy and life pursuit of Chinese literati [1]. The earliest recorded hermit in history was probably Xu You, who lived more than 4,000 years ago in ancient China. Emperor Yao admired his talents and wished to abdicate the throne and let him take the power, but he firmly refused, believing that such a request stained his ears. From then on, he lived in seclusion in the remote mountains far away from the court until his death. In the following dynasties, more hermits gradually emerged. Yan Hui lived in poverty in a humble abode. Lin Fu lived in seclusion at the West Lake in Hangzhou, living alone in his hut on a lonely mountain. Jie Zitui was eternally memorized by the world for his feat of cutting off his meat from his thigh to serve the starved king and living in seclusion without saying anything about his contributions. There were numerous such kinds of great hermits in history who were deeply memorized and respected through the ages.

Chinese hermits are a special and independent group of people. They abandon high status and wealth, preserving the real themselves. Taking off expensive clothes, they wear rags. Leaving luxurious houses, they live in small cabins. They do not aspire to stay in high positions. Instead, they choose to live a life indifferent from fame and follow a quiet transcendent attitude. In all ages, the development of spirit and ideology of Chinese hermits never ceases. Their existence shines like a bright star in the universe of Chinese long history.

### 1.2. A Brief Introduction of western hermits

Hermit culture is not exclusively unique to China. It is also of great value to western culture and societies [2]. When it comes to western hermits, one of the most representative figures is probably Henry David Thoreau. In the era of the increasingly rapid development of capitalist civilization, everyone sought fame and wealth. Unlike others, Thoreau lived in seclusion by the lake, purified his soul, found his unique lifestyle, and wrote the book “Walden”, which had a profound impact on future generations. In addition, Michel de Montaigne, Bill Porter, Giorgio Morandi... The contributions of these outstanding hermits influenced and enlightened almost all fields of western culture.

### 1.3. Total Introduction

As both influential hermits, Tao Yuanming and Thoreau respectively represented their hermit cultures. Their qualities and features could be regarded as typical cases to analyze the similarities and discrepancies between Chinese and western hermits.

## 2. Similarities

### 2.1. Abandoning the Pursuit of Material Things

Both Chinese and western hermits abandon the pursuit of superficial and material things. They abnegate the time living in busy, prosperous, well-conditioned urban areas and are readily able to live in remote countryside or peaceful lakes and forests.

Tao Yuanming used to be an official six times in his life, experiencing a tremendous number of unexpected ups and downs in his career path. After countless failures and setbacks, he gradually came to the conclusion that officialdom was a cage. Eventually, Tao resigned from his post as the magistrate of Pengze County and began his life of seclusion until the end of his life. "Wealth and power are not my ambitions, and unattainable is the abode of the gods [3]." He gave up glory, wealth and power of being an official. Instead, he chose a life of farming and laboring in the fields, staying away from wealth and reputation.

"The more things a man can let go, the richer he is [4]." In Thoreau's view, having wealth was not the same as having power; on the contrary, wealth was a burdensome out-of-body thing. Thoreau sharply criticized luxurious lifestyles and returned to a simpler view of life. He lived beside Walden Lake for a total of two years, two months and two days. He built a 14-square-meter cabin for only 28 dollars and spent an average of 0.27 dollars per week on food. He adhered to his own proposition in his lakeside life: the true meaning of life cannot be obtained in the hustle and bustle of life, and the only way to realize the essence of life is to return to simplicity.

### 2.2. Returning to Nature

"After dawn I attend to the wilds and dirt. Under moonlight I return, a hoe shouldered [5]." From the dimension of lifestyle, Tao Yuanming stayed away from chaos and noises of earthly interruptions, and created a simplified living pattern in experiencing and practicing. He farmed surrounded by mountains and creeks, living with villagers in the countryside. He took farming, raising silkworms, reading and writing as a way of life, advocating the "joy of the idyllic garden".

Additionally, his deep love and longing for nature as well as the enjoyments of idyllic life not only existed in his lifestyle, but were also clearly demonstrated in his poetry. "When I was a child, I wasn't interested in earthy rhymes. Instead, I yearned for hills and knolls." The so-called "earthy rhyme" was nothing but the worldly flattering, designing and opportunistic behaviors of people, which were something that Tao Yuanming would never imitate. In contrast, he insisted on staying unaffected and simple, which resembled the characteristics of nature. "Colorful autumn chrysanthemums attracting my view, I pick their petals glittering with dew." "Elms and willows shade the eaves in back, peaches and plum stretch out before the hall.[5]" Images like "elm", "willow", "peach", "plum" were filled with rich living atmosphere, and the poet's unadorned, natural and noble attitude was also fully reflected in the "pine", "chrysanthemum", "bamboo" and other natural imagery.

Similar to Tao Yuanming, Henry David Thoreau stayed far away from the din of rapidly developing cities, returning to the purest nature alone, with the lake as his companion [6]. In Thoreau's writing, his love, respect and passion for nature were explicitly and unhesitatingly represented.

"Sometimes, I would feel that I could find in any object of nature the same sweet, gentle, and inspiring companionship [4]." In his works, he described people's palms as leaf veins, portrayed the sound of cows bellowing in the distance at the hour of dusk as a serenade sung by a troubadour, and regarded nature as our great-grandmother. In the peace and simplicity of nature, he recorded his

observations, actions and thoughts, which were the origins of his extraordinary work “Walden”. This unprecedented work clearly symbolized his thoughts towards nature, which were memorized, absorbed, internalized and deepened by future generations.

### **2.3. Paying Attention to the Real Society**

Although a great number of Chinese and western hermits decide to seclude to live a simple life far from big cities, they never truly separate themselves from the real society. They still care about people and current affairs.

Tao Yuanming shifted from a high position to the field. Although his way of life changed radically, he did not stay away from the group of working people. He still tied his heart to society and his country. “He saw before his eyes a wide, level valley, with houses and fields and farms. There were bamboos and mulberries; farmers were working and dogs and chickens were running about [7].” In his works, he also portrayed such peaceful scenes free from exploitation and oppression. He was a recluse and did not ask about the world, but at the same time, he still hoped that one day he would be able to sweep away the darkness and modify the world into a good and happy society with peace and political clarity, where there were no war, no invasion, and people could live in peace and work in contentment and earn their own living.

Similarly, living alone by Walden, Thoreau never ceased his care and worries about the people and country. Thoreau advocated the abolition of slavery, detested the commodification era under industrial civilization, and was even arrested and imprisoned for refusing to pay the “poll tax” during his life in Walden Lake. All these show that although his body was in Walden Lake, his mind never stopped paying attention to current society. He was dissatisfied and disappointed with society, but he chose to try to bravely remodel it instead of escaping from it.

## **3. Discrepancies**

### **3.1. Different Motives of Seclusion**

#### **3.1.1. Motivations of Chinese Hermits**

Chinese hermits always secluded involuntarily. “When I was young, I was full of ambition, wanting to go beyond the four seas, like a bird waving its wings, flying high in the sky.” Most of them originally had a high aim, looking forward to changing the current society with their own power. However, they never succeeded in achieving their ideals, so the only thing they could do was to pay attention to their own moral uplift and chase for self-improvement, instead of benefiting the public when in power, which was their initial objective [8]. Tao Yuanming used to be eager to enter the bureaucracy. However, his political ambitions failed to be recognized, and his willingness to reconstruct the order of society couldn’t reconcile with the materialistic officialdom. Although he tried to grab every opportunity to come to the fore, after numerous failures, he downheartedly took a step back, like a promising seed which couldn’t find its suitable soil. Full of dissatisfaction and resentment, he determinedly took off the robe and returned to a farming life.

Assuming that he was able to launch his career into the stratosphere, he would never return to the hidden mountains and forests. So, to sum up, seclusion was Tao Yuanming’s second choice when his original goal failed to be realized.

#### **3.1.2. Motivations of western Hermits**

Instead, western hermits always seclude voluntarily. Their motivations for seclusion always fulfill their own willingness and needs, in order to achieve some purposes, such as the exploration of life, the space for them to reflect on themselves.

“I stepped into the jungle because I wanted to live a meaningful life. I wanted to live a deep life, to take in all the essence of life, and to crush everything that is not life, lest I realize at the end of my life that I have never lived. [4]” Thoreau lived in the nineteenth century in the United States at a time when industrialization was just beginning, and unavoidably rising material wealth occupied the minds

of the people [9]. Thoreau keenly realized that man is bound by all sorts of external objects, so he unhesitatingly returned to nature. "I went to the woods because I wanted to live with ease and face only the basic facts of life." He refused to be buried in the trap of the material world and became the tool of capital accumulation, so he pursued a brand-new life by Walden Pond, chasing the purification and exploration of his own soul. In experiencing and practicing, he built his own "Utopia".

Besides the pursuit of internal elevation, the seclusion of Thoreau was also a warning and exhort to the world. Not only for the purpose of achieving self-improvement, he also secluded in the hope of evoking the masses who were tempted by materially wealth. Undoubtedly, he was a hermit who completely plunged into the arms of nature. However, he was more like a fighter, using his actions and works to awaken others from the lure of wealth and fame.

### 3.2. Different Realms on Seclusion

Generally speaking, the seclusion of Chinese hermits was more thorough and genuine. Most of them completely felt disgusted about wealth, politics and fame, thoroughly staying away from achieving high status. They determinedly lived in seclusion for their entire lives, regarding seclusion as their lifelong destination.

"Fret not over by-gones and the forward journey take [3]." Deeply immersed in the seclusion life, Tao Yuanming was completely free from the imbroglia of officialdom. Although the rural life was austere, he was still happy and satisfied in poverty. The imperial court offered him a political official post, but he stoutly refused with the excuse of illness. Tan Daoji heard of Tao Yuanming's talent. He came to urge him to become an official and offered him a fine meal. However, Tao Yuanming refused to accept the tempting invitation and continued his simple but unrestrained seclusion life. It was not only his body that secluded, but also his heart and thoughts. All the ups and downs, losses and losses, as well as the resulting sadness and pain, were dissipated in this peaceful and tranquil pastoral seclusion of life.

Compared with Chinese hermits, the seclusion of western hermits tends to be comparatively incomplete and purposeful. They always seclude for exact clear purposes. Many of them write their own seclusion experiences or insights and philosophies gained in seclusion as works and use these works as contributions or as inspiration to the world, and they do not resent seeing their works appear on the market. For example, Henry Miller, who was an American writer and artist in the 20th century, chose to spend most of his life in Paris and Crete, but he did not live entirely in seclusion. He continued to write and maintain contacts with literary circles, communicating and interacting with other artists and intellectuals.

If the seclusion of Tao Yuanming was described as a lifelong destination, the seclusion of Thoreau was more like a periodical experience and practice. Thoreau's ultimate goal of "coming out of the world" was actually "entering the world" [10]. Unlike Tao Yuanming who spent most of his life in seclusion, Thoreau stayed by Walden for about two years, which was just a short period of his entire life. During this period, Thoreau completed several renowned works. He had never eternally lived in a state of seclusion. Instead, he eventually returned to the normal world.

## 4. Influence

The seclusion of Chinese and western hermits not only has a profound impact on areas like literature, art and sociology, but also inspires people as an eternal spiritual treasure. In the past, it stimulated numerous people to take after them and pursue a noble life of seclusion. In current times, it also motivates people to seek the real themselves. Today, in such a hurried, busy and material world full of competition and involution, it's nearly impossible for us to have time and energy to find a remote, private and peaceful place for seclusion. However, we can regard the thoughts of these great minds as our mottoes and guide to actions. Always respect nature. Always pursue freedom. Always listen to the voice of our hearts. Then an undisturbed, easy and ideal life will come.

## 5. Conclusion

Both Chinese hermits and western hermits have left a colourful mark in history. Their contributions are important references for the past, the present and also the future. Comprehensively analyzing the inner similarities and differences between them can provide newer insights, stimulate deeper understandings and then offer practical countermeasures to the current society.

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