

Research Article

The Reception and Dissemination of Henry Thoreau in China (1926–1949)

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Abstract

While it is commonly believed in Chinese academic discourse that Henry Thoreau's reception in China began with Xu Chi's 1949 translation of *Walden*, this study challenges that view by tracing Thoreau's earliest appearances in Chinese literary culture back to the 1920s. Beginning with Zheng Zhenduo's 1926 essay "On American Literature," Chinese intellectuals such as Zeng Xubai, Zhang Yuerui, Xu Chi, Yu Dafu, and Lin Yutang cited, commented on, or translated Thoreau's works, albeit often in fragmented or introductory ways. By examining early Chinese publications, writers' reflections, and initial translations, this article reconstructs the formative phase of Thoreau's reception in China from 1926 to 1949. Despite the limited depth of these early engagements—owing to political instability and cultural constraints—they laid essential groundwork for the later influence of Thoreau. The study argues that Thoreau's image during this period remained partial and blurred, yet these initial encounters reveal the mechanisms of early Sino-American literary exchange and the conditions necessary for cross-cultural literary transmission. Through this case study, the article contributes to a broader understanding of the historical dynamics shaping the global circulation of American literature.

Keywords

Henry Thoreau, Dissemination, Reception, China

1. Introduction

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), one of the most influential American writers of the nineteenth century, is best known for *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, *Civil Disobedience* and *Walden*. He has been described as "among the most thought-provoking figures in American literary history" [1] and "one of the most widely known American authors of the nineteenth century—perhaps second only to Edgar Allan Poe." [2] His best-known work, *Walden*, topped American Heritage magazine's 1985 list of the "Ten Books That Shaped the American Character." [3] In developing his intellectual vision, Thoreau drew creatively on

elements of classical Chinese philosophy—particularly the Confucian canon—accessed through English and French translations. Over the course of the twentieth century, his writings gradually entered China, where they have exerted an increasingly significant cultural and intellectual influence.

In contemporary Chinese scholarship, accounts of Thoreau's reception and dissemination typically begin with Xu Chi's 1949 Chinese translation of *Walden*. [4] Yet was there truly no engagement with Thoreau in China prior to this date? A careful examination of periodicals, literary histories, and translation records suggests otherwise. As early as 1926,

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Zheng Zhenduo provided a brief introduction to Thoreau in his article “American Literature,” published in *The Short Story Magazine* (Vol. 17, No. 12). In the years that followed, intellectuals such as Zeng Xubai, Zhang Yuerui, Xu Chi, Yu Dafu, and Lin Yutang either cited, discussed, or translated Thoreau’s writings.

Although many of these early references were fragmentary and primarily introductory in nature—and though Xu Chi’s translation, completed under considerable time pressure, was not fully refined—they collectively represent the formative stage of Thoreau’s reception in China. These early materials hold significant value not only for tracing the development of modern Chinese publishing practices but also for illuminating the broader contours of early Sino-American literary exchange.

This article aims to reconstruct this overlooked early chapter in the reception of Thoreau in China and to clarify the trajectory of his influence. Given that newspapers and journals served as primary conduits for the transmission of Western knowledge and literature in modern China, the discussion is organized into three sections: early Chinese publications on American literary history, Chinese writers’ early responses to Thoreau, and the first Chinese translations of his work.

2. Early Introductions to Thoreau in Chinese Histories of American Literature

In 1926, the prominent literary historian Zheng Zhenduo published a substantial article titled “American Literature” in *The Short Story Magazine* (Xiaoshuo Yuebao). Often regarded as “one of the earliest comprehensive efforts in China to present a complete picture of American literature,” [5] the article does not overlook Thoreau. Zheng briefly discusses the shifting reception of Thoreau in the West and introduces his representative work, *Walden*:

“Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), a friend and companion of Emerson, was largely neglected in his own time but has recently received growing attention. His major work *Walden*, recounts two years of life in the forest—a solitary and self-reliant experience. He demonstrates his ability to live independently, sustained by nature alone. ‘Every morning is a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I can see the innocent and natural self.’ What he reveres is simplicity and innocence. His observations of nature are direct and primitive, free from the specialized knowledge of professional naturalists.” [6]

This passage not only marks Thoreau’s first documented appearance in a Chinese literary history but also presents a thematic summary that emphasizes his ideals of simplicity, self-reliance, and communion with nature—concepts that would later resonate with a range of Chinese intellectuals. Zheng also comments on Thoreau’s literary style and political

philosophy:

“His writing is refined and fluent. His thinking is radical, revolutionary. He believes that when a government becomes an organized oppressor, it is the duty of a conscientious person to resist. On one occasion, he refused to pay taxes, was arrested, and spent a day in jail until a friend paid his fine. After his death, Emerson remarked that the world had yet to recognize the true greatness of Thoreau.”

[6]

Although Zheng’s remarks are relatively brief, they touch on key aspects of Thoreau’s life and thought, including his literary style, political radicalism, and personal integrity. As a lifelong proponent of the idea that literature should serve life, Zheng advocated for revolutionary realism and emphasized literature’s potential for social transformation. His reading of Thoreau highlights the latter’s radicalism while downplaying his pacifism—a selective interpretation that reflects the ideological orientation of the time.

In 1929, Zeng Xubai, then editor-in-chief of *The True, the Good, and the Beautiful*, published *The ABC of American Literature*, in which he selected fifteen writers to represent major literary schools of the period. [7] Thoreau was among them. While Zeng’s general view of American literature was critical, his narrative acknowledges its development. In the introductory chapter, he asserts: “American literature has no independent standing in the true history of world literature. It is merely an offshoot of British literature.” [6] Yet he concedes a turning point: “Only after the early 19th century, with the establishment of America’s national foundations and advances in various sectors, did bright stars emerge in the literary field.”

Despite acknowledging certain literary achievements, Zeng maintains a critical stance: “To this day, American literature has yet to produce truly great writers who could compete with the masters of the world stage for lasting renown.” [6] Within this framework, he concedes: “A few exceptional writers—such as Walt Whitman, Dule (i.e., Henry Thoreau), Mark Twain, William Howells, James Lowell, and some of Ralph Emerson’s work—indeed reveal truths about life.” [6] Thoreau thus figures among the select few American authors whom Zeng holds in relatively high esteem. While he stops short of recognizing Thoreau as a “great writer” of global stature, he does regard him as a “dedicated writer” and a “bright star” within the national literary canon—a figure of distinctly American significance.

A more balanced appraisal appears in 1933, when Zhang Yuerui, an English editor at the Commercial Press, offered a concise but thoughtful account of Thoreau in the fourth chapter of *American Literature* (Meilijian Wenxue), titled “Nineteenth-Century Literature.” Zhang briefly contrasts *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* with *Walden*, observing that the former is “not a popular work”, while the latter stands as “his masterpiece, with a more intricate, vivid, and humorous style”. He further interprets Thoreau’s philosophical vision as both a continuation and transcendence of

mainstream American intellectual traditions, noting that “his sincere and forthright personality is reflected in his prose”. [8]

3. Thoreau in the Writings of Early Chinese Authors

In the 1930s, prominent Chinese writers such as Yu Dafu and Lin Yutang offered their reflections on Thoreau. As early as 1927, Yu Dafu mentioned Thoreau’s travel writings in his short story collection *Chenlun* (Depravity, published in 1921), referring to him as “Sha Luo” and translating Excursions as Xiaoyao You (“Free Roaming Journey”), though the reference remains cursory. [9] A more substantive engagement appears in Yu’s 1934 essay “Quiet Literary Works,” which yields three key insights.

First, Yu expresses deep admiration for Thoreau’s ideals, noting a personal affinity with his spiritual orientation. Second, he explains why Chinese readers may find Thoreau accessible, highlighting shared sensibilities—a perspective that has since encouraged numerous comparisons between Thoreau and Chinese Daoist thought. Third, Yu offers a nuanced yet appreciative evaluation:

“These quiet, reclusive literary pieces, from the standpoint of literature itself, are by no means without value. But we in the East tend to believe that one should only engage with them after one’s convictions are settled or after one has achieved success in life. For young people, brimming with energy and still pursuing their studies, indulging in such lofty and aloof works can be dangerous. However, for the modern individual overwhelmed by the struggle for survival and the pursuit of bread, to take a break from the battlefield of life and read a few pages of such a book can be as refreshing as a box of ice cream on a hot June day or a cup of warm wine in December.” [10]

Yu’s metaphor-laden prose simultaneously affirms the value of Thoreau’s contemplative writing while acknowledging the practical challenges it may pose for younger or more materially preoccupied readers. His ambivalence reflects a broader tension in modern Chinese literary discourse: the search for balance between spiritual retreat and social engagement.

In *The Importance of Living* (1937), Lin Yutang’s bestselling English-language work, Thoreau features prominently. Lin writes: “Among all American writers, Thoreau’s philosophy of life is perhaps the most imbued with a Chinese sensibility. Because I am Chinese, I feel a strong spiritual affinity with him. I only discovered him a few months ago, and I’m still filled with joy. If I were to translate Thoreau’s writings into Chinese and present them as the work of a Chinese poet, no one would doubt it.” [11] He continues: “His profound naturalism is something we Chinese ought to preserve... Take Tao Yuanming, for example. We find that the active outlook on life has already shed its foolish pride, and the philosophy of disengagement has lost its sharp rebelliousness—yet these

traits can still be found in Thoreau... To live a life of leisure costs very little, as Thoreau wrote in *Walden*.” [11]

Written with the explicit aim of introducing Chinese culture to Western readers, *The Importance of Living* invites particular attention for its sustained engagement with Thoreau. Lin’s reflections are significant on two counts. First, he discerns an unexpected yet compelling resonance between Thoreau and a distinctly Chinese sensibility, particularly in their shared life philosophies and spiritual temperaments. Second, he draws a brief but suggestive parallel between Thoreau and Tao Yuanming, whom he hails as “the most harmonious product of Chinese culture.”

Lin’s repeated invocation of Thoreau, while articulating the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of Chinese life to a Western audience, is a gesture with interpretive potential. It calls attention to the strategic function Thoreau plays in Lin’s cross-cultural discourse, raising questions about whether this invocation serves to bridge, reflect, or quietly critique the East–West cultural divide.

4. Early Chinese Translations of Thoreau

In the 1930s, *Modern* (Vol. 5, Issue 6) published a special issue on “Modern American Literature,” yet Thoreau was notably absent—an omission that suggests he was not yet regarded as a “modern” writer within the Chinese literary imagination. In 1941, however, Gǎijīn Publishing House in Yong’an, Fujian Province, released a Chinese translation of Theodore Dreiser’s biography of Thoreau, translated by Baishi. By the late 1940s, the translation of American literature into Chinese had reached a pivotal juncture.

A landmark moment came in 1949 with the launch of the American Literature Series, later renamed the Morning Light World Literature Series. This eighteen-title, twenty-volume collection represented a major cultural initiative in Sino-American literary exchange. Notably, the only prose work included was Thoreau’s *Huā’ěrténg* (*Walden*). The inclusion of *Walden* highlights its growing status as a quintessential work of American literature. The project itself arose from close Sino-American collaboration. In the fall of 1945, the American sinologist John King Fairbank proposed the idea of jointly compiling a systematic introduction to American literature. The Chinese side selected titles they deemed most suitable for domestic readers, drawing heavily on Alfred Kazin’s *On Native Grounds* as a key reference. Qiao Guanhua subsequently entrusted the writer Xu Chi with the selection and translation of texts—and it was Xu who ultimately chose to translate *Walden*. [12]

At the time, *Walden* was widely recognized—by both Chinese editors and American figures like Fairbank—as a quintessential American text. For Chinese readers seeking to grasp the spirit of American literature, *Walden* offered a distinctly personal and contemplative perspective. Riding the momentum of Morning Light World Literature Series, the translation, printing, and publication of *Walden* were carried

out with considerable care and fanfare. Yet the endeavor proved ill-timed. With the founding of the People's Republic of China, the nation was swept up in widespread jubilation and the urgent demands of national reconstruction, while Sino-American relations had reached a historic low. As a result, this carefully prepared edition made little cultural impact—"most people had no time to pay attention to such a profoundly quiet book." [13]

5. Conclusion

In his essay "Thoreau's Reputation", renowned Thoreau scholar Walter Harding documents the flourishing publication and scholarship on Thoreau in Asian countries such as Japan, yet notably omits any reference to Thoreau's dissemination in China. [14] Similarly, Chinese scholars such as Cheng Aimin, Chen Aihua, and Li Jie have largely overlooked Thoreau's reception in China prior to 1949. This omission is not cited here to discredit the contributions of earlier researchers, nor to preclude the possibility that new archival discoveries may ultimately shift the timeline of Thoreau's introduction to China.

From a contemporary perspective, however, it is evident that between 1926 and 1949—whether in the early Chinese histories of American literature that briefly acknowledged Thoreau, in the personal reflections of writers like Yu Dafu and Lin Yutang, or in Xu Chi's translation of *Walden*—few of these efforts can be classified as rigorous academic inquiry. Most focused on translation and introductory commentary. While some interpretations were perceptive, they generally lacked a systematic or theoretical framework. At this stage, the image of Thoreau conveyed to Chinese readers resembled a preliminary sketch—his outline vaguely perceptible, yet his full intellectual and philosophical contours remained obscure, like a flower in a mirror or the moon reflected on water.

Nonetheless, these early endeavors by scholars, writers, and translators were foundational. Their contributions established the initial groundwork for Thoreau's broader cultural transmission in China. As American comparatist Joseph T. Shaw aptly remarked, "The seeds of various influences may fall, but only those that land on fertile soil will sprout." [15] In the context of this study, the "seeds of influence" represent Thoreau's thought and literary legacy, while the "fertile soil" is the historical and cultural terrain of China as the receiving context. Between 1926 and 1949—a period of profound political and social upheaval—the environment was largely inhospitable to the deeper reception of Thoreau's works. It was not until the post-1990s era of rapid socioeconomic development that Thoreau truly began to take root, flourish, and exert meaningful cultural influence in China. In this regard, one might say that Thoreau first arrived in China in 1926—but too early.

Beyond its historical reconstruction, this study also offers theoretical insights into the processes of cross-cultural literary transmission. Thoreau's early reception in China illustrates

how political, social, and epistemological factors mediate the transfer of foreign literary figures into new cultural contexts. This perspective contributes to ongoing discussions in comparative literature, translation studies, and cultural studies regarding the dynamics of global literary flows and reception histories.

Author Contributions

Liu Luechang is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Biography

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