

Article

# Chinese Thought and Transcendentalism: Ecology, Place and Conservative Radicalism

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**Abstract:** My central claim is that resonances between Transcendentalist and Chinese philosophies are so strong that the former cannot be adequately appreciated without the latter. I give attention to the *Analects*, the *Mengzi* and the Tiantai *Lotus Sutra*, which Transcendentalists read. Because there was conceptual sharing across Chinese traditions, plus evidence suggesting Transcendentalists explored other texts, my analysis includes discussions of Daoism and Weishi, Huayan and Chan Buddhism. To name just some similarities between the targeted outlooks, Transcendentalists adopt something close to *wu-wei* or effortless action; though hostile to hierarchy, they echo the Confucian stress on rituals or habits; Thoreau's individualistic libertarianism is moderated by a radical causal holism found in many Chinese philosophies; and variants of Chinese Buddhism get close to Transcendentalist metaphysics and epistemologies, which anticipate radical embodied cognitive science. A specific argument is that Transcendentalists followed some of their Chinese counterparts by *conserving* the past and converting it into radicalism. A meta-argument is that ideas were exchanged via trade from Europe through North Africa to Western Asia and India into the Far East, and contact with Indigenous Americans led to the same. This involved degrees of misrepresentation, but it nonetheless calls upon scholars to adopt more global approaches.

**Keywords:** American Transcendentalism; Confucianism; Chinese Buddhism; Chinese philosophy; Daoism; ecology and place; Emerson; Thoreau; metaphysics and epistemology; social and political philosophy



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## 1. Introduction

For decades now, scholars have asserted that North American Indigenous values seeped into Transcendentalism and later classical pragmatism (Wilshire 2000; Pratt 2002; Mann 2005). The inspiration of Brahmanism is also obvious, with Thoreau regularly lauding the Bhagavad Gita. That Chinese views inflected US intellectual history is another premise that gets occasional but consistent attention (e.g., Carpenter 1930; Christy 1932; Detweiler 1962; Versluis 1993; Foust 2017). A prevailing fashion, however, cuts in a contrary direction to assert that classical American authors were dilettantes, orientalist and colonial appropriators (Scott 2007; Isenberg 2013; Altman 2018; Willsky-Ciollo 2018). Without claiming that nineteenth century Americans had the opportunity to refine distinctions between separate strands of Asian thought, my position in this article will be that Chinese philosophy illuminates main themes in Transcendentalism. Earlier US Founding Fathers talked about Chinese outlooks, too (Wang 2014), echoing key European Enlightenment figures (Lai 1985; Ching and Oxtoby 1992; Kow 2016). But it is in Transcendentalism that one finds rich resonances with Chinese ideas about causal holism, intersubjectivity, transformational idealism and interactional realism. These parallels unlock Transcendentalist peculiarities, which range from their dual emphasis on radical individualism and extreme moral culpability for social ills, to their merging of idealism, constructivism and realism.

The two best-known Transcendentalists—Thoreau and Emerson, the targets of this article—often quoted from the two most famous Confucian compendiums: the *Analects*

and the *Mengzi*. Thoreau additionally translated portions of these texts from French. He may have done the same for an excerpt from the *Lotus Sutra*—influential in the Tiantai school of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism—for the journal *The Dial*, but it is debated whether he was the translator (Scott 2007), despite being the issue’s editor (Fields and Bogin 2022). Although Thoreau’s writings make no explicit references to Daoism, they nonetheless exhibit parallels, and reasons can be offered for this. First, Thoreau spent time exploring forests, lakes, rivers and mountains, observing winter succumbing to spring and comparable cycles of change. When these experiences are combined with his practical know-how plus his absorption in the aesthetic and the fact that both are beyond words, it is not implausible to speculate that all this encouraged him to think a little like a Daoist. Second, Thoreau’s reading brought him into contact with the sinologist Guillaume Pauthier, who translated the *Daodejing*, with the former’s notebooks hinting that he read this text (Ch’en 1972). Third, despite sharp differences between Confucians and Daoists, they share some nomenclature and ways of seeing (Berthrong 2003; Slingerland 2007), and elements from both seeped into Buddhism after it entered China from India (Tang 1951; Ge 2014, chp. 6). Thus, vague familiarity with Chinese Buddhism or even Confucianism may have been a path to absorbing some Daoist elements. Fourth, there were longstanding exchanges of goods and ideas from Mediterranean Europe through North Africa to West, Central, South and East Asia (Sen 2009), with one scholar (Mair 2012) speculating that the word *dao* has extremely old roots that spread into ancient languages around the world. This last explanation is not specific to Transcendentalism, but fits the general claim that intercultural commonalities exist and often for specifiable reasons.

Now, Transcendentalists were not systematic in their engagements with Asian outlooks and sometimes flatly confused matters (e.g., Emerson 1845, p. 290). However, this is unsurprising since they lacked the resources that most of us today enjoy at our fingertips. Simultaneously, virtually all people confuse matters even from their own cultures, yet nonetheless, absorb core elements. A presumption will be made that Transcendentalists did this with Chinese ideas. So while I appreciate the complicated pluralism in Confucian, Daoist and Chinese Buddhist systems and that the region has other philosophies besides, I will not get too microscopic in my analysis because that does not serve my purpose of showing how Chinese philosophy generally illuminates Transcendentalism.

A point of stress will be on place-based ecological orientations in classical Chinese and American outlooks—“ecology” referring to dynamic systems that give things existence and meaning. In addition to Chinese perspectives directly impacting Transcendentalism, kinships between them may have arisen from the fact that people from both regions faced slow bucolic realities (Dewey 1922a). In any case, Transcendentalism was a major intellectual force in the US, and Emerson was even William James’s godfather. Together, this makes it easier to see why the next generation of American philosophers were thinking in East Asian directions—indeed, before Dewey had his two-year stint in China, which profoundly affected him (Dewey 1939; Shusterman 2004). This last point is important because pragmatists entwined historically with phenomenologists (they sometimes read one another). Both directly influenced ecological psychology, and the three movements together exerted sway on contemporary embodied cognitive science, which sometimes draws inspiration from ancient Asia (see Varela et al. 1991).

An obvious part of what motivated Transcendentalists to their views was their deep dissatisfaction with the present, but they were a little unusual in that they overtly looked to the ancients for answers. In effect, they conserved the past to transgress the present in progressive ways, echoing texts like the *Analects* (7:1). Therefore, Transcendentalists and at least some of their ancient Chinese counterparts may be regarded as advancing a conservatively inspired progressive radicalism, whether on the level of their social philosophy, epistemology or metaphysics. If it is true that they did this specifically by absorbing Chinese philosophies, then the situation is that we have to look to Asia to understand key aspects of American intellectual history.

## 2. Intercultural Exchanges

There are a number of assertions I plan to make, such as the claim that Thoreau adopted something close to the Chinese principle of *wu-wei*, or effortless action; or that the Transcendentalist emphasis on habits parallels the Confucian stress on rituals, even while rejecting hierarchical dimensions of the latter; or that Transcendentalists' version of libertarian individualism might have been moderated by the causal holism of various Chinese philosophies; or that the least skeptical variants of Chinese Buddhism get close to Transcendentalist metaphysics, which merge normally opposing constructivist and realist notions. If all this is so, then grasping Chinese thought is an important step in understanding American traditions. Before defending these assertions, however, I offer a schematic account of how Westerners have seen themselves in relation to the world, for this bears on dominant styles of thinking and conceptions of reality. Transcendentalists struggled against these currents, which is arguably a reason non-Western outlooks fascinated them.

A peculiarity of Modern Western intellectual history is that for all the disagreements between its philosophical combatants, relatively few disputed that mind is an inner theater. This led to an essentially private notion of self. For instance, despite their different metaphysical and epistemological standpoints, [Descartes \(1637\)](#), [Locke \(1690\)](#) and [Kant \(1781\)](#) in one way or another understood the self as something internal or hidden and atomistic or individuated. [Heidegger's \(1927\)](#) existential phenomenology began moving beyond this internalist picture. However, his outward disposition was somewhat undercut by his quasi-moral judgment that individuals achieve "authentic" being (of self) when they come to terms with the separateness entailed by the "mineness" of their own death. Heidegger began as an aspiring theologian, and his normative commitments may have partly traced to Augustine's pre-Modern concept of self as an inner sanctum for dialoguing with God, which scholars often locate as the origin of Modern notions (e.g., [Viney 1969](#); [Taylor 1989](#); [Berrios and Marková 2003](#)).

History, of course, is not as tidy as writings about it. One suspects the tracing of private self to Augustine is overplayed. Also, there are at least partial deviations from atomistic and internalistic conceptions, [Spinoza \(1677\)](#) and [Rousseau \(1762\)](#) being cases. While an individualist, [Nietzsche \(c. 1885, 1887, 1888\)](#) is another exception because he asserts humans are a plurality of competing impulses and that the ego is an illusion arising from grammatical and other kinds of confusions. Late Moderns, such as [Dewey \(1922b\)](#) and [Merleau-Ponty \(1964\)](#), jettisoned the notion of exclusively private self on the grounds that psychological existence is embodied and socially embedded. Adding to the historical complexity, Enlightenment notables like Spinoza, Leibniz, Wolff and Voltaire were all curious about Chinese thought ([Lai 1985](#); [Ching and Oxtoby 1992](#); [Kow 2016](#)). Later, Schopenhauer showed interest in Asian philosophy ([App 2010](#)), and he—with others like Spinoza and Emerson—swayed Nietzsche, who influenced existential phenomenology. Interestingly, this same period had multiple European authors pondering Indigenous American ways of life. Some ([Stubben 2000](#); [Mann 2005](#)) suggest this seeded new ideas about human liberty, though there is debate about the amount of respect that Europeans had for Indigenous cultures, and it was tough for commentators to be adequately informed.

Another reason history is messier than writings about it is that the Western canon becomes less categorically so as one goes back in time. Ancient Greece and Rome traded goods and ideas through North Africa and into the East ([Sen 2009](#)), with Augustine living in North Africa. The Islamic world preserved Greek literature, and Muslims from regions bordering India influenced Christians such as Aquinas. Likewise, the Chinese Buddhist sage Fazang had ancestry in what would become the Muslim world ([Van Norden and Jones 2019](#)). Therefore, it may not be serendipitous that pre-Modern "Western" outlooks often mirrored non-Western ones that stress public habits, customs and social relations as bases for self. In addition to showing up in Africa and Ancient Greece ([Crippen 2016, 2021a](#); [Naaman 2017](#)), such views appear in Confucianism despite its differences from other regional traditions as well as its own internal pluralism ([Ames 2008](#); [D'Ambrosio 2018](#); [Rosemont 2018](#)). The Islamic stories of Rumi (trans. [Mafi 2018](#)) and the Brahmanical Bhagavad Gita

(trans. Miller 1986) similarly reject atomistic self in as much as both hold that enlightenment entails an oceanic joining with God or the divine cosmos that reveals individual existence is illusory.

As compared to Confucians, who place a premium on fulfilling proper social roles, Daoists and Chinese Buddhists are more anti-hierarchical and inclined to remove themselves from society to cultivate enlightenment. Yet despite these differences and internal sectarian variations, these three traditions generally align in arguing that things only manifest within larger wholes without which the particulars do not exist. The *Daodejing* [*Tao Te Ching*] holds that beings are harmonies of contraries so that “Something and Nothing produce each other” (trans. Lau 1972, chp. 2), as when presence and void make a valley. Chinese Buddhist texts, such as *The Flower Ornament Scripture* (trans. Cleary 1993, chp. 39) and another sometimes attributed to Dushun (trans. Tanabe 1999, p. 473), evoke the Vedic metaphor of Indra’s bejeweled net. Here, each jewel mirrors the entirety, so that the reflection in every gemstone is dependent on the interrelated whole. The net itself reiterates the point. This is because the ties and web depend on each other to instantiate as knots and a net. The *I Ching* is widely regarded as proto-Confucian, but also important in certain developments in Daoism and Chinese Buddhism (Tang 2015; Hon 2019). Pondering this book, Carl Jung (1950) compared ancient Chinese contemplation to modern quantum models, which are “decidedly psychophysical” (p. xxiv) in recognizing that observations change what is observed. The claim holds at macrolevels as well because an object has no specifiable length in isolation since its dimensions vary according to the relative velocity at which it is encountered. Transcendentalists and later pragmatists made similar assertions. Dewey’s (1929) pragmatic work would even reference non-classical physics in advancing the point. However, Dewey would add that in everyday life we register things by shaking and rattling them or else altering conditions under which they are observed, as when bending starlight with lenses (see Crippen 2021b).

This schematic history links to some points on which I will build. One is that atomistic self-construals that dominate the West appear to translate to analytical thinking styles, characterized by the dissection of problems into parts and attention to focal information. This is compared to more context-sensitive styles typical of other cultures, despite variations within and between them (Nisbett et al. 2001; Masuda and Nisbett 2001; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Mpofu 1994; Kiuchi 2006; Shell and Flowerday 2019; Ren and Kuai 2023). Psychologists, for example, have found that Chinese and Japanese participants have high awareness of what is occurring in overall scenes, whereas Americans attend primarily to foreground objects (Masuda and Nisbett 2001; Boduroglu et al. 2009).

As if recognizing prevailing Western thinking styles, Thoreau (1854, p. 98) said “the intellect is a cleaver”, which “discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things”. He not only characterized thinking as an analytic dissecting tool. He also distanced himself from this kind of cognition by saying “the intellect” instead of “my intellect”. Thoreau went on to deploy an organic, ecological and bodily metaphor: “My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore-paws, and with it I would . . . burrow my way through these hills”. This conveys a sense that primal comprehension is practical know-how of a sort that involves not only digging but merging one’s mind with the earth. The passage thereby suggests that wisdom is in the land, an idea carried in Indigenous American philosophies (DeMallie 1984; Whitt et al. 2001), along with Confucian, Daoist and Chinese Buddhist notions about sacred mountains, directions and suchlike (Paracka 2012). Embodied movement, such as that involved in burrowing, is an indivisible gestalt that cannot—save arbitrarily—be sliced into discrete bits (see Merleau-Ponty 1945, pp. 367–68). Thoreau’s comments here contain a further acknowledgement that gaining a sense of one’s surroundings means rooting about in them, making palpable contact. Thus, while Thoreau advocated self-sufficient individualism, his account contains an admission that even observing things changes them, so that we cannot exist without affecting others. This principle is core to his metaphysics, epistemology and social

views, and it is an outlook for which he would have found a wealth of materials in Chinese philosophy.

### 3. Personal Life, Place and *Dao*

Although constantly lauding ancient books, Transcendentalists wearied of what they saw as an era that fixated on writing about dead European authors. Emerson (1836, p. 5) famously complained: “Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” Thoreau (1854, 1862, 1863) repeated similar grievances. He grumbled about petty modes of communication—newspapers, the penny post and the telegraph—often employed to convey trivialities. He echoed Emerson’s wish for a primal and direct spiritual bonding with the living world that we misleadingly call “nature”—misleadingly because nature extends into human settlements, just as human activity affects virtually every living part of the Earth (Crippen and Cortés 2023). Thoreau’s back-to-nature inclinations connect to his philosophy of personal living, and both can be explored within the ancient Chinese concept of *dao*. The word itself is polysemous and can mean “way”, “road”, “walk”, “path”, “method” “to speak”, “to follow” and more (Xu 2010; Tan and Bao 2022). Though the term is important in diverse branches of Chinese philosophy, it particularly pervades works like the *Daodejing*, which will be a primary focus in this section, but with some attention given to Buddhism and Confucianism.

Various parts of the *Daodejing* (chps. 1, 37, 43, 56, 57) suggest that the genuine *dao* or way is unknowable and nameless, like an uncarved block that gives birth to definable things. The *dao* is beyond conceptualization. To speak of it in straightforward words is to stray crookedly from the path (*dao*), which is one reason why the *Daodejing* communicates in poetical terms. At the same time, the *dao* can be experienced as pervading everything, and it can be followed.

Central to the *Daodejing* (e.g., chps. 2, 12, 60, 63), and pervading much of Chinese philosophy, is the principle of *wu-wei*, which means not just doing what is effortless but adapting appropriately to situations with easy flow. Achieving by doing nothing is an instance: a state leader could do this by not interfering with officials under her, letting people perform according to their strengths, unless guidance is really warranted, in this way optimizing outcomes and generating frictionless harmony (see chp. 12). Acting in accordance with nature can also typify *wu-wei*. A case is an environmental engineer altering the course of a river by placing rocks to subtly change currents, getting the water itself to carve new channels, as opposed to erecting hard barriers, which will often fail anyways. *Wu-wei* is additionally illustrated by negotiating affairs with creative and spontaneous mastery in the absence of reflective planning; or again by the martial artists of fictional legends who exhaust opponents by bending like cloth to strikes and converting the force of blows into counterattacks.

The Daoist text, the *Zhuangzi* [*Chuang-Tzŭ*] (trans. Graham 2001, chp. 3.1), exemplifies many of the just mentioned aspects of *wu-wei* in its well-known parable about Cook Ting. While carving an ox, the cook brandished his blade so that it “never missed the rhythm, now in time with the Mulberry Forest dance”. Lord Wen-hui praised his skill, and Cook Ting replied:

What your servant cares about is the Way [道, the *dao*], I have left skill behind me. When I first began to carve oxen, I saw nothing but oxen wherever I looked. Three years more and I never saw an ox as a whole. Nowadays, I am in touch through the daemonic [神, *shen*, spiritual connection] . . . and do not look with the eye . . . I rely on Heaven’s structuring, cleave along the main seams, let myself be guided by the main cavities, go by what is inherently so. A ligament or tendon I never touch, not to mention solid bone . . . Now I have had this chopper for nineteen years, and have taken apart several thousand oxen, but the edge is as though it were fresh from the grindstone. At that joint there is an interval, and

the chopper's edge has no thickness; if you insert what has no thickness where there is an interval, then . . . there is ample room to move the edge about. That's why after nineteen years the edge of my chopper is . . . fresh . . .

Emerson (1862, p. 502) echoed this passage when he wrote: "You have seen a carpenter on a ladder with a broad axe chopping upward chips from a beam. How awkward! at what disadvantage he works!" But suppose he places "his timber under him. Now, not his feeble muscles, but the force of gravity brings down the axe; that is to say, the planet itself splits his stick. Now that is the wisdom . . . to hitch his wagon to a star, and see his chore done by the gods themselves".

As stated earlier, *dao* can literally connote "walking", and one of Thoreau's better-known essays (1862) bears this title. In it, Thoreau avers perpetual uncertainty as to "whither I will bend my steps" upon leaving for a walk, yet "strange and whimsical as it may seem" allows "instinct to decide" (p. 622). Breezily, he wanders wherever his walk—his way—takes him. This is always Westward, "toward Oregon, and not toward Europe" (p. 622), which means toward East Asia, whether or not he expressly intended this. Echoing the *Daodejing*, however, Thoreau adds that the names of places are meaningless. "You may name it America" where he walks, "but it is not America" (p. 661). That designation captures nothing about the locale. This claim recurs in Thoreau's (1854) *Walden* (pp. 195–96) where he laments the "poverty of . . . nomenclature" that stole from a beautiful "sky water" by calling it "Flint's Pond". The farmer who named it after himself "regarded even the wild ducks which settled in it as trespassers" and "never saw it", "bathed in it, "loved it", "protected it", or "spoke a good word for it".

The *Daodejing* uses natural processes, such as the flow of water into valleys, as a model for following the *dao*, and Thoreau's (1862) "Walking" similarly maintains that "there is a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright. It is not indifferent to us which way we walk" (p. 622). Daoists are known for revering nature and for having a degree of insolence toward mainstream social conventions. This was again echoed by Thoreau, who opened the essay by declaring a wish "to speak a word for Nature, for absolute Freedom and Wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil" (p. 557). Thoreau felt that society thrusts artificial templates onto life, against the natural flow of things. Just one example from *Walden* is Thoreau's (1854) claim that "we do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us" (p. 92). This is more than an assertion about the brutal labor practices employed to build US railways. Thoreau was also commenting on how railroad timetables regulate people who used to keep their own rhythms. Hence, in his day, doing things "railroad fashion" (p. 118) was an expression that indicated almost unnatural punctuality and precision.

Thoreau's (1854) preference for himself, then, was to adopt an easy and natural flow, and to achieve strength through weakness, as the *Daodejing* advises (chps. 20, 28, 36, 55, 61, 76, 78). A tree that sways with the beat of a storm does better than one that stiffly fights it. Water is supple, but eventually chews through mountains. Compared to adults, babies' bodies are flexible, and their minds capable of branching in vastly more directions. Thoreau, therefore, found himself "regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born" (p. 98), probably because society had weighed him down with so many baseless conventions. He also explained that some of his neighbors regarded him as a well-dressed loafer. But as he elaborated, he worked lightly, thus "wore light shoes and thin clothing, which cost not half so much" (p. 206). Also eating lightly, he did not have to labor hard for his meals; and by not overexerting his body, did "not have to eat hard" (p. 205). Likewise, Thoreau regarded land ownership as a "great encumbrance" (p. 32) since it burdens one with debts and upkeep. He added "herds are the keepers of men" (p. 56), with farmers indentured to their livestock. Wealth is "golden or silver fetters" (p. 16). In all these ways, Thoreau's life philosophy pointed towards effortless action.

These ideas—both Thoreau's and the principle of *wu-wei*—resonate with the tenet that attachments to material things are sources of suffering, especially when cravings are unsatisfied. Such a view shows up across religions, but is especially emphasized in Bud-

dharma and expressed in Chinese scriptures like the *Lotus Sutra* (trans. Watson 1993, chps. 59, 93, 131) and “The Ten Stages” in *The Flower Ornament* (trans. Cleary 1993). Thoreau’s criticisms of material attachments mark one place, among others, where he departed from standard libertarian stances about property. He did not go quite so far as to repudiate all rights to it, but he had almost no regard for his own, except in cases when his tax money was to be used to support slavery and war, as Thoreau (1849) made clear in “Resistance to Civil Government”.

Thoreau’s (1854) indifference to both material goods and his own property repeats in *Walden*. There, he reported not locking his desk or door when gone, so “the tired rambler could rest and warm himself”, or “amuse himself with the few books” or “see what was left of dinner” (p. 172). He proclaimed: “beware of all enterprises that require new clothes” (p. 23) and that “our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things” (p. 52). He said “a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone”, (p. 82), advising to “simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one” (p. 91). He recollected buying land only to have the sellers ask if they could back out. He left them with the land and their money too, yet “retained the landscape” without encumbrance of a “wheelbarrow”, thus “got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk” (pp. 82–83). He recalled being terrified by “three pieces of limestone” on his desk because they needed daily dusting when the “furniture of [his] mind was all undusted still”. He “threw them out the window in disgust”, with this anecdote paralleling the famous Chan (Zen) Buddhist poem by Shenxiu about keeping the mirror of the mind dust free (see McRae 2003, p. 61).

Some of Thoreau’s daily pursuits at Walden—gathering firewood and water—recall another celebrated Chan poem about doing the same, attributed to Layman P’ang (trans. Green 2009, chp. 2). Probably more than these activities, Thoreau (1854) loved tending his seven miles of bean rows, which he did not eat, but the work “attached [him] to the earth” (p. 155). He indicated that he was dedicated to it virtually as a ritual practice, in this way connecting a little to Confucian perspectives. He further suggested that it nourished his spirit in ways that even good books could not, with this idea linking to all three Chinese traditions discussed, for reasons that have been partly explained and that will be further elaborated. Yet as much as he loved his beans—and Thoreau dedicated a full chapter to them in *Walden*—he added that sometimes he simply sat “rapt in a reverie” from sunrise to sundown (p. 111). In different ways, this anecdote matches aspirations found in Daoism and Buddhism about letting go of abstract thoughts and just experiencing. Except for the fact that Thoreau was here alone, it also gets close to a parable from the *Analects*—a portion that Thoreau in fact translated (Tan 1993), likely while at Walden (Li 2014). This is where Kongzi praises Zengxi’s wish to “assemble a company of five or six young men and six or seven boys to go bathe in the Yi River and enjoy the breeze upon the Rain Dance Altar, and then return singing to the Master’s house” (trans. Slingerland 2003, 11.26).

#### 4. Social Life and Nature

Emerson (e.g., 1841a) and Thoreau (e.g., 1849) spent considerable time excoriating social customs, whereas Kongzi and Mengzi elevated them. But it ought to be remembered that the two Confucian sages were critics of their society, so did not just accept any kind of ritual. In works like the *Analects* (1.12, 2.3), moreover, one finds a clear rejection of unbendingly rigid adherence to rituals and rules. It should further be kept in mind that Thoreau’s (1854) *Walden* has long catalogues of daily habits. Emerson’s (1841a) *Self-Reliance* similarly advocates individualistic habits, which is to say, adopting classically American rites in “all the offices and relations”, including “religion”, “education”, “pursuits”, “modes of living” and more (pp. 44–45). It may, however, be granted that Transcendentalists concerned themselves less with group harmony than Kongzi and Mengzi, stressing personal dimensions in the interplay between habits and character formation. Yet simultaneously, leading figures in the American movement departed from standard libertarianism in their vital recognition of inescapable social interconnectivity. Emerson and especially Thoreau

quoted and studied Kongzi and Mengzi (Foust 2021), even if working with questionable translations. In light of all this, a case can be made that early Confucian and Transcendental social analysis proceed in at least partly similar ways.

A first point is that while Thoreau spent a great deal of time outside towns, many of his works—even including those about life in the woods like *Walden*—deal extensively with moral philosophy. While he offered ample criticism of the community at large, the book was also moral by virtue of reporting on his multi-year experiment in self-cultivation. As Thoreau (1854, p. 221) put it, “Every man is the builder of a temple, called his body, to the god he worships, after a style purely his own . . . We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones”. He here expressed not only the idea that a life can be a sacred artistic project, but that the media are corporeal. His daily embodied bean hoeing habits is one example that would have operated not just to clear his mind, but to cultivate the classic virtues of fortitude and perseverance. Another case in point is that Thoreau spoke admiringly of ancient Indian prescriptions for “how to eat, drink, cohabit, void excrement and urine, and the like, elevating what is mean” and “not falsely . . . calling these things trifles”, instead recognizing them as constitutive of etiquette that goes into human character (p. 221).

Developing what we may colloquially call “good habits” relates to effortless action or *wu-wei*. The *Analects* (trans. Slingerland 2003) advises against “coercive regulations” (2.3) and instead suggests: “When it comes to the practice of ritual, it is harmonious ease that is to be valued. It is precisely such harmony that makes the Way [道, *dao*] of the Former Kings so beautiful” (1.12). In other words, when we are habituated to take the appropriate action at the suitable time, it becomes effortless and uncalculated: we do not need to ponder the rule to be followed, potential rewards and punishments, but find ourselves acting nearly automatically. Thus, the same passage (1.12) concludes: “If you merely stick rigidly to ritual in all matters, great and small, there will remain that which you cannot accomplish. Yet if you know enough to value harmonious ease but try to attain it without being regulated by the rites, this will not work either”. The easy fluidity that comes with true mastery entails flexible adjustment to situational contours in a largely automatic yet non-reflexive way. The sage does not merely repeat rituals, but deploys them with some latitude. This is analogous to a great boxer, who ducks and weaves in unplanned but innovative ways that are possible only through years of ritualized practice. Ritualized training can be used to teach even things like mathematics, so that we strangely perform best when not explicitly calculating. Ethical behavior, likewise, should not be a matter of calculating, even though Confucians hold that people should be aware of rectitude. Good behavior instead should flow from habitual dispositions to do what is appropriate in a given situation, acting in harmony with it. The ideal is to cultivate “attuned” grace, such that one’s impulses, yearnings and “heart’s desires” accord with “the bounds of propriety” (2.4).

A second point is that a complex interplay between individualistic and social polarities is expressed in essays like Thoreau’s (1849) “Resistance.” Throughout this writing, he stresses that institutions are not agents and that only individuals can make differences in the world. The piece also advances negative rights, that is, the view that people are free to do whatever they want, so long as not doing injustice to others, defined as interfering with people’s freedom. So, as with other libertarians, Thoreau said if we are not in the causal chain leading to “even the most enormous wrong”, we are not personally obliged to dedicate ourselves to its “eradication” (p. 195). But whereas libertarians standardly take the antecedent of the aforesaid conditional for granted, in this way erecting a dividing barrier that shelters them from moral obligation, Thoreau seldom accepts that we are outside causal chains. In his day, he charged Northerners were responsible for Southern slavery because they “co-operate” and thereby participate in various economic and legal supports (p. 193). In addition to fitting with Confucian ideas about individual actions impacting larger social arrangements, Thoreau’s outlooks, as will soon be detailed, also gel with the causal holism that pervades multiple East Asian metaphysical systems. This takes the teeth out of the argument (e.g., Cady 1961) that Thoreau’s individualism would have

made him wholly antagonistic to a Confucian ethos. However, one may grant that whereas Confucianism regards good social arrangements as preconditions for human flourishing, Thoreau focused more on getting rid of bad ones that thwart personal growth.

A third point to note is that Thoreau (1849) held that certain moral principles follow from nature. The libertarian stress on freedom comes from the observation that fully conscious human agents, by nature, never want exactly the same set of things, so that the only common wish attributable to everybody is the desire to pursue individual interests without interference. Thoreau got more specific, arguing people are not to resign their “conscience to the legislator”, indicating respect “for the right” trumps “respect for the law” (p. 190). This is not license to make up one’s own morality and do anything since he thought it is self-evident that practices like slavery unjustly interfere with freedom, and with his compatriot Douglass (1852), Thoreau (1849) believed this should be so obvious as to need no further argument. However, too often people surrender their judgment to others, acting “as machines” with “no free exercise whatever of . . . the moral sense”, putting “themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well”. But “such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens” (p. 191). Thoreau not only highlighted a proclivity to laud the blindly obedient as patriotic, law abiding and so on. He also held that adjudicating moral matters is an importantly human feature that differentiates us from most other species on the planet. He asserted, therefore, that when we cease exercising our conscience, we become less fully human, more like “horses and dogs” (p. 191). In not adjudicating moral issues and acting as if it is all out of our hands, we shirk our duty to uphold justice, “*cost what it may*” (p. 193), whether the payment be economic turmoil or our lives.

Though Thoreau’s views parallel many philosophies from around the world, a few Confucian echoes are worth highlighting. First, while Confucians stressed social rituals more than Thoreau would have preferred; and while he would have objected to the idea of creating harmony via rituals that locate people within a hierarchical whole, it should be remembered that the *Analects* (1.12, 2.3) insist on some open flexibility. The text also criticizes governing by means of coercive rules, which might lead people to surrender their conscience to the state. Second, paralleling Thoreau’s insistence that we have a duty to do what is right, cost what it may, the *Mengzi* [the *Mencius*] (6A10) indicates that the exemplary person hates unworthiness more than death. Third, as with Thoreau, Kongzi and Mengzi appear to have advanced something on the borders of natural law, specifically maintaining humans naturally incline towards moral goodness. The *Mengzi* (trans. Bloom 2009, 6A2) says: “There is no human being lacking in the tendency to do good, just as there is no water lacking in the tendency to flow downward”. But as artificial contrivances can make water travel uphill, bad social convention and ritual can pervert human nature away from the good, which is close to what Thoreau was asserting. Counted among artificial contrivances are exaggerated forms of regulation, with the *Mengzi* (2A2) offering a parable of a man killing grain by yanking it upwards in hopes of making it grow faster (also see Li 2014).

Confucian thinkers were more receptive to refined comforts than what is typical in Chinese Buddhism. At the same time, the *Mengzi* (6A10) records that the sage will always prioritize rightness over luxuries, for doing the reverse diverts moral virtue away from its natural course towards goodness. Buddhists equate material attachments to suffering, because desire produces deprivation or fear of it, entangling one in the rotating wheel of existence, as explained in *The Flower Ornament* (trans. Cleary 1993, p. 746). The same text states: “The origins of worldly ways are all due to attachment” (p. 745), and the enlightened “have no attachment or greed for any objects of desire” (p. 431). We can debate whether Thoreau went this far, but he unequivocally saw acquisitiveness as a burden. A telling anecdote comes from Thoreau’s (1862) essay “Walking”. There, he recounted surveying swampy land for a man so literally and figuratively “up to his neck and swimming for his life in his property” that above it he might have “written the words which Dante read over the entrance to the infernal regions,— ‘Leave all hope, ye that enter’” (p. 667).

## 5. Holism, Metaphysics and Mind

In the last section, I talked about how Chinese ideas about interconnectivity help explain how Thoreau could start with standard libertarian assumptions about minimal moral responsibility, only to conclude that we have enormous duties because we are in the chain leading to injustice. In this section, I elaborate on the theme of interconnectivity, but this time drawing more on various schools of Chinese Buddhism and looking at how they illuminate Transcendental metaphysics and epistemology.

The *Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters* (trans. Kuan 2011, chps. 18–32) as well as the earlier-discussed parable of Indra’s bejeweled net (trans. Cleary 1993, chps. 39; trans. Tanabe 1999, p. 473) are just a few entries from Chinese Buddhism, which suggest that entities are interrelationally instantiated. On this account, moreover, an individual thing can be no more constant than its surrounding arrangements, which the *Maharatnakuta Sutra* describes as swirling torrents (trans. Koo et al. 1983, Sutra 21, p. 5). Emerson (1841b, p. 274) advanced a similar idea, remarking that “the universe is fluid and volatile” with “no fixtures in nature”, so that “permanence is but a word of degrees”. Buddhists derive a corollary from this: if the cosmos and its occupants are always becoming something else, then by virtue of this alone, they are empty, that is, devoid of self-identity. Lack of self-attribute of course also follows from the dependent co-origination of entities and their properties.

Weishi Buddhism is a Chinese branch that stresses that anything we can talk about is a product of the mind, which Xuanzang (trans. Chan 1999, p. 380) argued undergoes constant transformation, always coming into existence as something new, which means continually going out of existence too. Through all this, the “storehouse consciousness” retains a residue or “seeds” from the past that “perfumes” or biases future transformations. Emerson (1844) offered his own version of this when he wrote that “inevitably does the universe wear our color, and every object fall successively into the subject itself” (p. 56). Elsewhere in the same piece: “We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are” (p. 53). He went on: “Perhaps these subject lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects” (p. 54). These passages indicate that Emerson would have appreciated the active dynamics of Weishi and its notion of perfuming. But it should also be noted that his tastes were less skeptical when he stopped theorizing about psychology and focused on practical matters, as in the earlier example of a worker using the force of gravity to split wood.

Prominent in Chinese Huayan Buddhism, Fazang, advanced a causal holism that asserts that “one is all” and “all is one” (trans. Van Norden 2014, p. 88). Elaborating by way of a rafter-building analogy, Fazang states that “the rafter is the building” and “the building is the rafter” (trans. Elstein 2014, pp. 82–83), the idea being each makes one another what they are and so exist because of one another (with Dewey later saying the same about means and ends). This is too strong for Transcendentalists like Thoreau, but he nonetheless inclined towards a kind of ecological holism. He did so in the literal sense of being a natural historian who believed that living things make ecosystems what they are and vice versa. This means living things must be grasped within the ecosystems that define them, as opposed to merely isolating them as specimens to be dissected. He also advanced an ecosocial view that recognized that the atomistic individualism of standard libertarians is hopeless in a world in which nobody acts without affecting others.

*The Flower Ornament* (trans. Cleary 1993) observes: “All philosophies in the world/Are mental fabrications;/There has never been a single doctrine/By which one could enter the true essence of things” (p. 300). Or again: “Verbal expression has no basis in facts. Furthermore, facts have no basis in words” (p. 462). Or once more: “Things expressed in words/Cannot disclose the character of reality” (p. 379). Fazang (trans. Cleary 1983, p. 157) adds that this is why Buddhist scripture sometimes communicates in strange ways “far beyond the horizons of speech and thought. It penetrates the trap of words and concepts”. A further resonance between Thoreau’s thinking and Huayan Buddhism, then, is the shared intuition that reality exceeds what can be captured in ordinary thought and

language; reality is at best expressible in the “timeless” stuff of poetry that requires odd grammars and twisting words precisely because it is beyond ordinary reasoning (Crippen 2015). In this way, there is some consilience with ideas from the *Daodejing*.

In an article published in *The Dial*, Thoreau (1842, p. 40) warned not to “underrate the value of a fact”. His comments bring to mind a claim which is regularly made—perhaps too simply—that early Chinese outlooks did not distinguish between facts and values, reality and appearance (e.g., Geaney 2000; Willman 2016). Whether or not overstated, the idea is that the fact of the matter and its value can be the same, for instance, when a community encounters a rampaging buffalo as dangerous. Tiantai Buddhism—a school that Transcendentalists had at least some contact with given that a portion of the *Lotus Sutra* appeared in *The Dial*—advances a tenet that the phenomenal world of appearance is the only world, so by extension real. As the Tiantai sage Zhiyi (trans. Donner 1976, p. 46) remarked: “A single, unalloyed reality is all there is—no entities whatever exist outside of it”. On some interpretations, enlightenment within Huayan Buddhism likewise brings awareness that there is no distinction between reality and appearance (Van Norden and Jones 2019).

Many passages penned by Thoreau are evocative of various Buddhist ideas while resonating with Daoist notions, too. For example, Thoreau (1862, p. 672) suggested that the natural world outstrips words and human conventions, remarking that a grove has “no politics” and is indifferent to written deeds, which, know nothing about “the setting sun lighting up the opposite side of a stately pine wood”. In *Walden*, Thoreau (1854, pp. 176–77) offered what could be an alternative for the Indra’s net metaphor for dependent co-arising. Walden Pond “is blue at one time and green at another . . . Lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of the color of both. Viewed from a hill-top it reflects the color of the sky, but near at hand it is of a yellowish tint next the shore where you can see the sand, then a light green, which gradually deepens”. Sometimes it matches the “vivid green next [to] the shore”, but under other circumstances, the hue is that of “changeable silks and sword blades”. However, “a single glass of its water held up to the light is as colorless as an equal quantity of air”.

Another passage from *Walden* has Thoreau (1854) talking about delighting in “the forms which thawing sand and clay assume in flowing down the sides of a deep cut on the railroad” (p. 304). He chronicled rich colors and textures and how the process is an effect of winter succumbing to spring. He described it in primordial terms of sand flowing “down the slopes like lava, sometimes bursting out through the snow”, with this occurring “when the frost comes out in the spring, and even in a thawing day in the winter” (p. 305). Then he characterized it as a microcosm of river formation, noting how “innumerable little streams overlap and interlace one with another” (p. 305). He next narrated the transformation as a living “hybrid product, which obeys half way the law of currents, and half way that of vegetation” (p. 305). He explained: “As it flows it takes the forms of sappy leaves or vines, making heaps of pulpy sprays . . . and resembling . . . some lichens; or you are reminded of coral, of leopards’ paws or birds’ feet, of brains or lungs or bowels, and excrements of all kinds” (p. 305). He added: “The sun acts on one side firsthand” and less on the opposing “inert bank” (p. 306), which receives less of its warmth. In “the creation of an hour, I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me” (p. 306). And “when the sun withdraws the sand ceases to flow, but in the morning the streams will start once more . . . and branch again into a myriad of others” (p. 307).

This passage aptly captures a situation of dependent co-origination in a Buddhist sense, and it is also interesting that Thoreau did not arbitrarily distinguish between nature and civilization since the sandbanks are specifically along a railway. It is simultaneously difficult not to glimpse the *Daodejing* (trans. Lau 1972) in Thoreau’s words. The ancient text, after all, contains metaphors of earth and sky (*di* 地 and *tian* 天), thawing ice, valleys, estuaries and water carving paths, along with expressions of how the *dao* births, nurtures and transforms the “myriad creatures” (chps. 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 15, 25, 32, 38, 39, 41, 42, 51, 61, 62, 66). Daoism additionally sees *yin* and *yang* as dynamically bringing discernible things into

appearance. For example, presence (*yang*) and absence (*yin*) together comprised the tiny sand fissures that Thoreau described. Movement from cold (*yin*) to warmer (*yang*) seasons likewise transformed the sand banks. A variation of this was the activity (*yang*) or passivity (*yin*) that occurred in opposing mounds depending on how much contact they had with the Sun. Thoreau (1854, p. 318) identified another side of metamorphosis when he spoke of a putrefying animal that was on his daily path. The microbial action and resulting stink, however, gave assurance “of the strong appetite and inviolable health of Nature”, which is “so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed”. This, too, recalls the *Daodejing*, which regards “heaven and earth” as “ruthless”, never “exhausted” and wont to treat “the myriad creatures as straw dogs” (chp. 5)

If the passages quoted from Thoreau are indicators, then we mainly observe changing realities. But Transcendentalists went farther, foreshadowing the idea that observing things means changing them. Emerson (1836, p. 92) expressed the principle: “Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, molds, makes it . . . Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house a world . . . Build, therefore, your own world”. In the hands of Dewey (1925, p. 259), this proclamation became an anti-skeptical blending of epistemology and ontology that argued that perception and cognition are “qualities of interactions in which both extra-organic things and organisms partake”, instead of mere phenomenal representations. Seen from Dewey’s (1896, 1925) perspective, which recent enactive cognitive scientists repeat verbatim (see Crippen 2017, 2020), an attribute like glassy smoothness is not in bottles alone nor in brains; it is enacted by fingers caressing over a surface that allows them to glide easily. Dewey (1920, 1929), scales this up to various forms of knowledge gathering, for example, the experimental sciences, since they too reveal reality by introducing changes to it. One difference between Dewey and enactivists, however, is that proponents of the latter are more subject-oriented. This relates to their purported constructivism, which the originators of the movement (Varela et al. 1991) advanced in an overt effort to distinguish themselves from one of their forerunners, Gibson (1966, 1979), who was a self-proclaimed realist. The stress on constructivism also relates to the expressed Buddhist underpinnings of the founding enactivist book, which emphasizes dependent co-origination (Varela et al. 1991).

What Dewey’s pragmatism (e.g., 1925) shows, building on his transcendental predecessors, who in turn learned from their Chinese forerunners, is that constructivism and realism need not be at odds. He held, on the one hand, that any reality is necessarily interactional. On the other, when changes are introduced through interactions, the alterations really are there, so that constructivism and realism can mean practically the same thing. This offers less skeptical ways of understanding Weishi claims that worlds are mind dependent. Gibson’s (1966, 1979) thesis is that agents encounter action possibilities that accord to their capacities (but exist independently of them), so water has walkable properties for some insects but not for humans, regardless of whether either is present at a given pond. By this same token, because people’s embodied situations are not precisely identical, there are at least slight variations between the worlds they encounter. Objectively, a stairway may be closed to an elderly person and open to a teen, just as a bar with sexually aggressive patrons may pose dangers to women that it does not on average to men (Crippen 2022). Looking at this from the standpoint of American pragmatism, which Gibson cites as an influence, one might add that humans mostly generate and hence encounter compatible realities because their similar embodiment means that their interactions with their surroundings have a lot in common. To the extent this is so, people inhabit overlapping worlds, which is why we usually have a basic understanding even with people from other cultures who do not speak our language. Though these illustrations are not expressly religious, they parallel less skeptical Buddhist ideas enough to wonder whether Dewey partly absorbed Asian notions from Transcendentalism before travelling to China. *The Flower Ornament* (trans. Cleary 1993) states: “Because of differences in the force of acts/Living beings’ lands are not the same” (p. 243). A little later, it adds: “By the individual acts of beings/These worlds are infinite in kind”. (p. 246). Much further on, it concludes: “The

multiplicity of the worlds does not destroy this one world, and the singleness of this world does not destroy the multiplicity of those worlds" (p. 821).

## 6. Conclusions

This article focused on the mutually implying metaphysics, epistemology and social reasoning found in American Transcendentalism and certain strands of Chinese philosophy. I attended particularly to holistic sides of the *Daodejing*, early Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism, some of which directly influenced Transcendentalists.

One area that Chinese perspectives help clarify is Transcendental social philosophy. To be more specific, an intercultural perspective sheds light on how Transcendentalists could start with radical individualism only to end up stressing extreme culpability on the grounds that acting in one part of the world has repercussions somewhere far away. Thoreau and Emerson also appeared to have adopted or promoted something close to *wu-wei*, both as a practical and spiritual principle. Whether consciously or not, their work mirrors text like the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. Thoreau, in particular, found life serenely fulfilling when he rid himself of attachments, which allowed not only for easy flow, but whimsical spontaneity and enjoyment, something valued by Daoists and Confucians if the *Analects'* passage about bathing in the Yi River is to be trusted. There are additional parallels to Confucianism because the sage gracefully does what is harmonious to the situation, as a matter of free-flowing habit. Although Emerson's and Thoreau's views on virtuous habits were partly inspired by their knowledge of ancient Greeks, they read and quoted the *Analects* and the *Mengzi*, so these influences should not be discounted. Another plausible influence is Buddhism since Thoreau (1844, ed.) oversaw the issue of *The Dial* that published a portion of the *Lotus Sutra* which contained discussions about attachment. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that his commentaries about the burdensome nature of attachments closely match Buddhist insights inasmuch as most scriptures from this tradition agree that cravings are sources of suffering and traps that keep people unenlightened (this is also a theme in the Bhagavat Gita, which Thoreau read extensively). The article wrapped up on the theme of interconnectivity, focusing on Daoism and multiple schools of Chinese Buddhism and looking at how they illuminate Transcendental metaphysics and epistemology. Here, the goal was to explain how Transcendentalism and the Chinese influences it absorbs lead to the embodied and anti-skeptical views of American pragmatists, which influence Gibson, who in turn has vastly shaped the course of contemporary cognitive science.

As periodically indicated, there are a wide variety of tributaries in history that might have been followed, and it is possible to tie in strands from Africa, the Middle East, West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia and Indigenous cultures from the Americas. My obvious reason for not following all these is there is no space for it in a single paper or even a book, yet this is still the point on which I would like to finish: that cultures have been mixing for millennia. This means in most cases gaining an appreciation of a specific culture entails doing the extremely hard work of adopting a global and historically aware approach.

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