

# The Sage Engaged

How Chinese Thought Influenced the  
Worldview of H.D. Thoreau



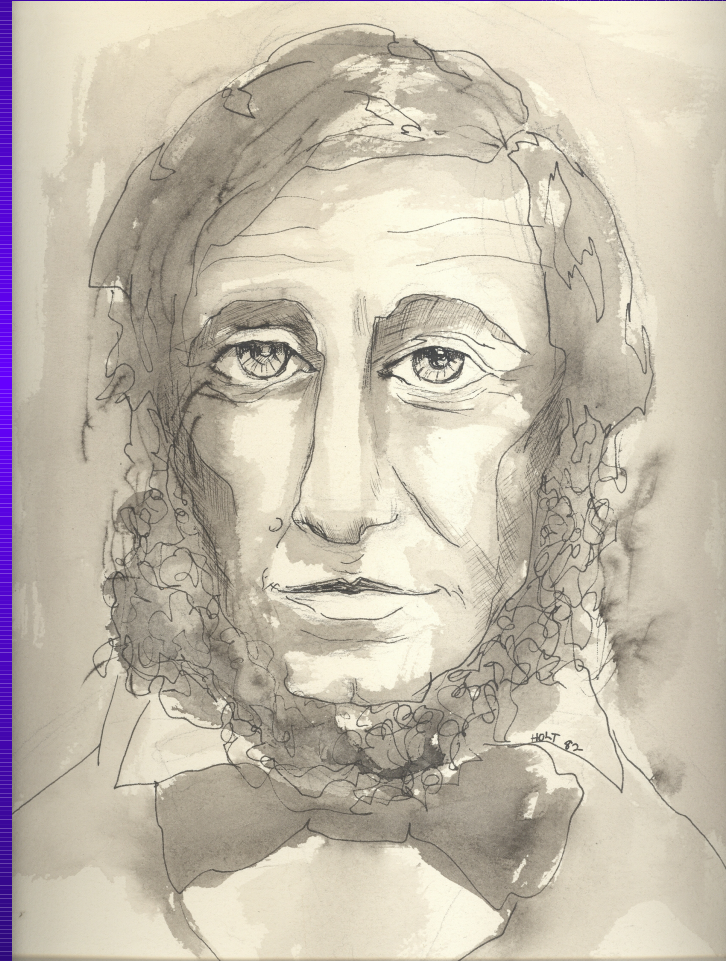
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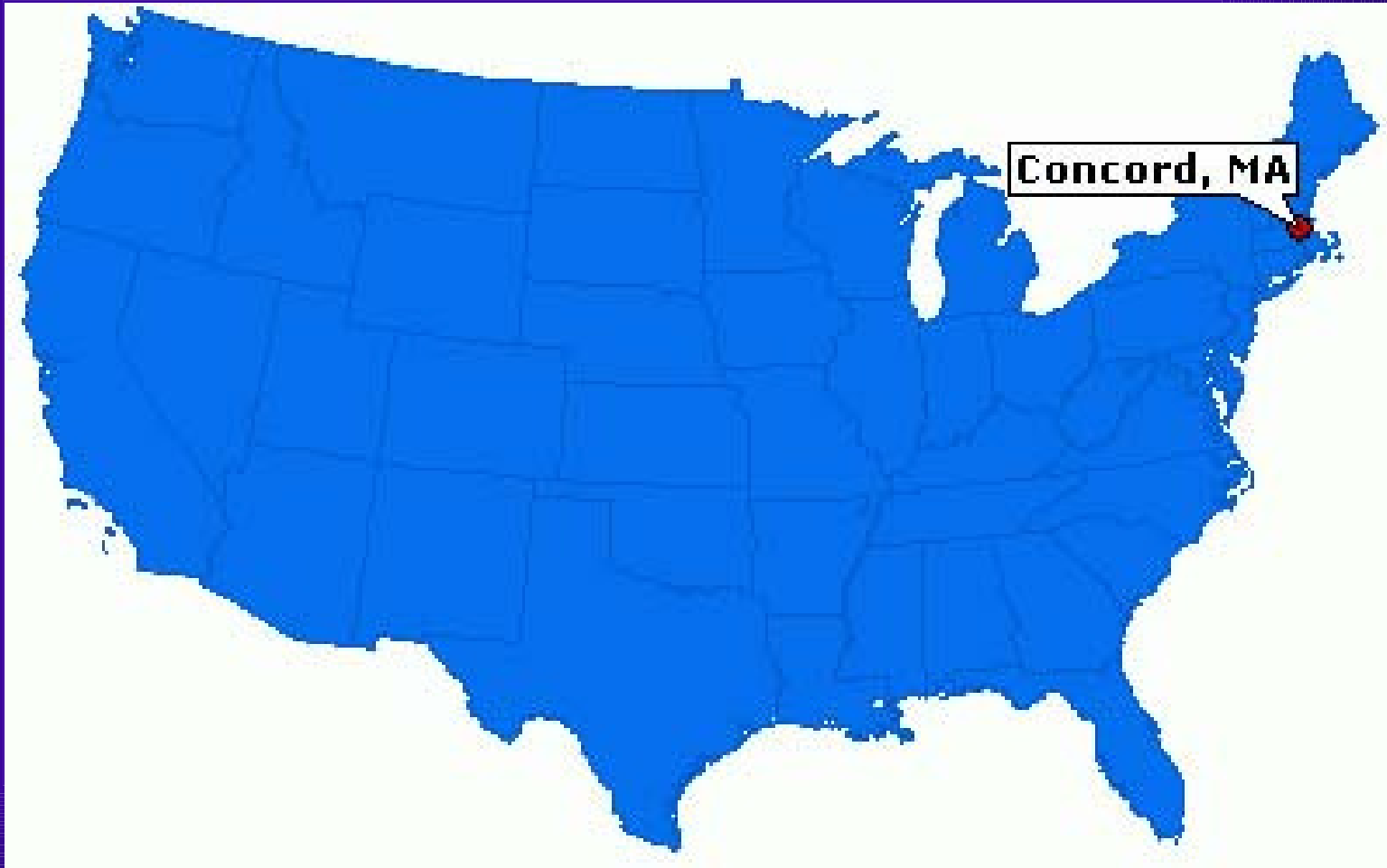
# Henry David Thoreau:

## A man of many contrasts

- ◆ Activist or a-political?
- ◆ Gruff or tender-hearted?
- ◆ Lazy good-for-nothing or hard worker?
- ◆ Loner or social butterfly?



# Where Thoreau Lived



<http://www.epodunk.com/>

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# Thoreau's Developing Mindscape

- ◆ Books and translations from Asia pour into the Boston and Salem harbors in the early 1800s.
- ◆ Henry encounters Asian thought at Harvard from 1834-1837 and through his friend Emerson.
- ◆ While more is written about the influence of India on Thoreau, he was also greatly influenced by Chinese thought.



# Chinese Works in Boston (1830s)

## The Four Books

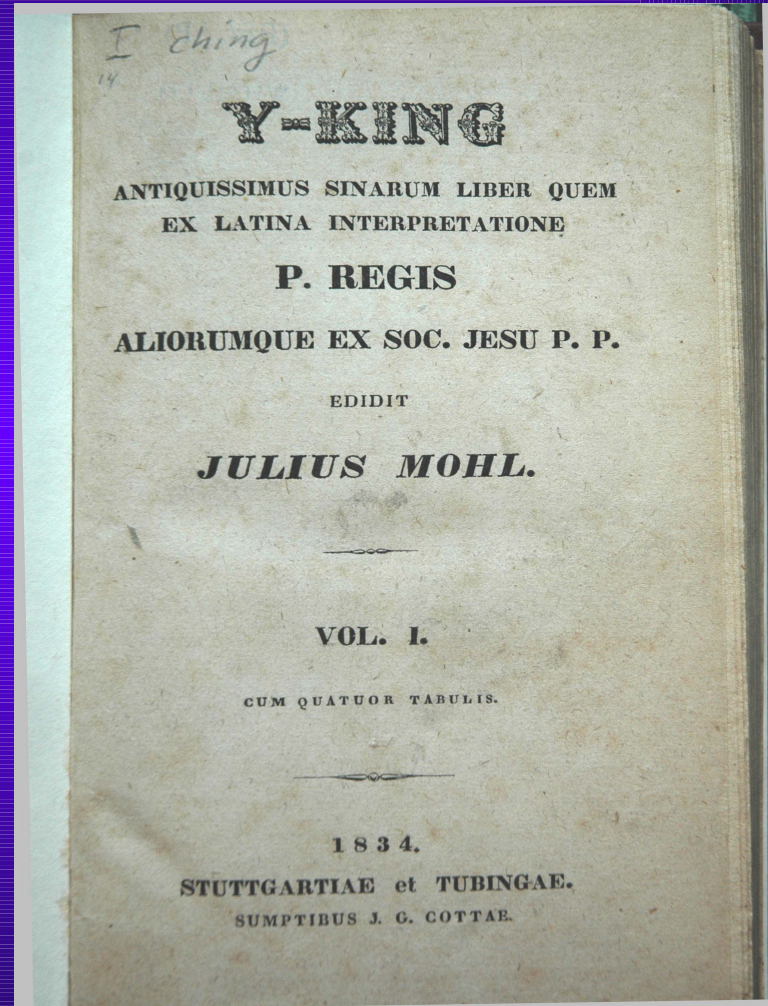
- ◆ The Great Learning
- ◆ The Doctrine of the Mean
- ◆ The Analects
- ◆ The Mencius

## The Five Classics

- ◆ Changes
- ◆ Poetry
- ◆ Rites
- ◆ History
- ◆ Spring and Autumn Annals

## Daoist Classics


- ◆ Daodejing
- ◆ The Chuangzi





# *Translations from Chinese Classics into European Languages*

- ◆ 1591, Father Ruggiero, “The Great Learning,” Latin
- ◆ 1687, Father R.F.P. Intorcetta and Father Philippe Couplet, “The Morals of Confucius,” Latin (finds its way into *The Phenix* that Thoreau reads in college)
- ◆ 1809, Rev. Joshua Marshman, “The works of Confucius,” and 1814, a Chinese grammar, English
- ◆ 1817, Dr. Remusat, “The Doctrine of the Mean,” French
- ◆ 1822, Remusat, Chinese grammar, French
- ◆ 1828, Rev. David Collie, “The Four Books,” English
- ◆ 1834, Regis, “The Y-King,” Latin
- ◆ 1837, Pauthier, “The Great Learning,” and in 1838, “Daodejing,” both in French
- ◆ 1843, Thoreau publishes selections from Marshman's 1809 work in *The Dial*



# *Some Sources of Thoreau's Chinese Reading before Walden*

- ◆ Harvard Library
- ◆ Harvard Institute Library
- ◆ Friends such as Emerson and Alcott
- ◆ The Phenix booklet
- ◆ Marshman and Collie, in English; then,
- ◆ Pauthier and Remusat in French and Latin



# *The Thoreau Chronology*



- ◆ 1839 Week on the Concord and Merrimac with brother John
- ◆ 1843 Thoreau publishes Confucian excerpts in *The Dial*
- ◆ 1845-47 Thoreau writes *A Week on the C&M Rivers* while at Walden
- ◆ 1854 Publication of *Walden* with several references to Chinese thought.





# *What idea in Chinese literature most appealed to Thoreau?*

- ◆ The Superman
  - The Oversoul in Hinduism
  - The Superman of German Transcendentalism
- ◆ The Hero
  - Achilles and other heroes in Greek Myth
- ◆ The Superior Person
  - Uniquely represented in the Confucian classics

# *Be all you can be*



- ◆ Morality did not have to be biblically based or rooted in Socratic theory
- ◆ Each person has the potential to become greater and better
- ◆ The Chinese position on this was eminently practical, based on common sense



# Characteristics of the Superior Person (as listed by Miles M. Dawson)

- ◆ Purpose
- ◆ Poise
- ◆ Self-sufficiency
- ◆ Earnestness
- ◆ Thoroughness
- ◆ Sincerity
- ◆ Truthfulness
- ◆ Purity of thought and action



# *Characteristics of the Superior Person (continued)*



- ◆ Love of truth
- ◆ Mental hospitality
- ◆ Rectitude
- ◆ Prudence
- ◆ Composure
- ◆ Fearlessness
- ◆ Ease and dignity
- ◆ Firmness
- ◆ Lowliness
- ◆ Avoidance of sycophancy



# *Characteristics of the Superior Person (continued)*



- ◆ Growth
- ◆ Capacity
- ◆ Openness
- ◆ Benevolence
- ◆ Broadmindedness
- ◆ Charity
- ◆ Moderation
- ◆ The Golden Rule
- ◆ Reserve Power





• *Helping us  
understand  
Thoreau as*

*a person,  
writer, and  
idealist*





# Criticisms of HDT's Character and Responses

## ◆ Criticism

- Standards too high
- Scorned organized religion
- Unconnected and aloof
- Narrow existence
- Cared too much about nature

## ◆ Response

- Aim for the stars
- Upheld individualism
- Loved people, passionate about justice
- Rich inner life
- Cared about nature just right!



## Relevant Quotes from “The Analects”

“When you’re ignored by the world like this, and yet bear no resentment, isn’t that great nobility?” (p. 3)

“Have I stood by my words in dealing with friends? Have I practiced all that I’ve been taught?” (p. 4)

“The noble-minded are content without a full belly or the comforts of home.” (p. 6)

“The noble-minded are all encompassing, not stuck in doctrines; Little people are stuck in doctrines.” (p. 14)





# More quotes from “The Analects”

“Aspiring to the Way, but ashamed of bad clothes and bad food: such a person knows nothing worth discussing!” (p. 31)

“Be loyal to the principles of your heart.” (p. 36)

“He was diligent in his love of learning, and not ashamed to seek answers from those beneath him.” (p. 47)

“My life has been my prayer.” (p. 76)

“If you don’t understand words, you’ll never understand people.” (p. 232)

*The Analects, Confucius tr. David Hinton, Counterpoint Books, Washington D.C., 1998*

# Looking to the West, Listening to the East



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# For more information about HDT

<http://www.thoreausociety.org>

<http://www.walden.org/institute/>

<http://blogthoreau.blogspot.com/>

<http://thoreau.eserver.org/wfchron.html>

<http://www.ReligiousScholar.com>

*Presentation photos and drawing by Linda Brown Holt.*