

FEATURE

From Beijing to Bellingham

Dating the Beginning of a New Life from a First Reading of *Walden*

by Ning Yu

"How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book!"

I stumbled into that sentence in a used copy of *Walden* almost a quarter of a century ago, when my classmates and I could hardly read English but were studying fourteen hours a day to improve our reading skills. As of now, I still hold the quote as my all-time favorite because a new era in my life was dated from my first encounter with it. Having taught at a U.S. college for a decade, I've met with scholars who respond to the quote in very different ways. Some read it as a rhetorical question and thus argue that Thoreau is an elitist. How many people date personal eras from their reading? Just a few who really know the art of "reading as a noble intellectual exercise," as Thoreau seems to suggest in the "Reading" chapter.

Actually, some of Thoreau's contemporaries satirically labeled him and his fellow transcendentalists as the New England Brahmins. Other scholars read it as a celebratory exclamation: good books are important for they have changed so many lives! The latter critics tend to regard Thoreau as a true voice of the U.S. democratic ideal. Like Walt Whitman, Thoreau celebrates the potentials of many, not just of the elite. My professional training has thoroughly prepared me against such simple binary oppositions and romantic naivete. Yet, against all reason and training, I irrationally embraced—and indeed, all my classmates and I in the junior seminar on "Readings in American Literature" unanimously and passionately held—the second interpretation. Thoreau touched every single one of us on that smoggy fall afternoon in Beijing, 1981.

There were twenty of us. Exactly ten boys and ten girls. It was right after the Cultural Revolution, and few of us had had a formal high school education. I had worked as a bricklayer for five years after junior high. Thanks to the days when my friends and I drilled on English sentence patterns while working on the scaffolding, and with the help of good luck, I passed the cutthroat college entrance examination and became an English major in 1978. My classmates were former shop attendants, soldiers, farmhands, corn-mill workers, and even a hotel bellboy. Our textbooks had been but English versions of Communist Party propaganda: "The Story of Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou Working with Ordinary People on the Site of the New Reservoir," "Karl Marx in the British Museum," and "The Story of a Poor Peasant Boy Who Taught Himself How to Read and Write in the Evil Old [namely, pre-communist] China." But 1981 was different. With our junior year came a professor from the U.S. and real English and American books. We began to read Emily Dickinson, Joseph Conrad, Kafka, Shakespeare, Faulkner, Dickens, and, most importantly for me, Thoreau.

That afternoon. Dr. Eric White (at that time not finished with his doctoral dissertation) threw on my desk a copy of the Modern Library College Edition of *Walden and Other Writings*. He wasn't sure how Chinese students would respond to the harsh voice of the independent New Englander. "Read a few pages from it and see if you like it," he said to the handful of students sitting around me. "If you guys do, maybe we'll read some excerpts from it."

We loved it. Thumbing through the book together, we began to pick up our favorite aphoristic sentences. Before we knew it, we had started a competition of favorite quotes. The philosophical Mr. Liu loved Thoreau's translation of Confucius: "To know that we know what we know, and to know that we do not know what we do not know, that is true knowledge." Xiao Zhong, the bellboy, favored the opening sentence of the "Solitude" chapter: "This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore." Sharmay, the captain of the "Iron Girls" from a collective farm in the mountains, was pleased that Thoreau understood her business: "[My beans] attached me to the earth, and so I got strength like Antaeus." And the poet Ah Jun found that Thoreau had articulated a question that he had been pondering for quite a while: "Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?" All twenty of us dated a new era in our lives from that evening with *Walden*. However, my own life-changing epiphany was triggered by Thoreau's "life experiment" rather than by any one-liner.

Laying bricks for thirteen days out of a fortnight was backbreaking, and that was what I did for a living during the five years between junior high and college. Yet, being a man of a small frame and smaller hands, I never got very good at it. The best worker in my construction team could lay eight hundred bricks a day, but my personal record was only six hundred eighty. Although my mind was always busy with English pattern drills, I honestly gave my muscles to the building of walls. Nevertheless, the Party secretary of our company never forgot to remind us that we owed the Party a great deal: "The way you guys work, you can't even earn your own keep. The Party feeds you. Don't you ever forget to repay the Party!" Of course the poor soul didn't mean it. It was his job. He had to say it. Just as we had to lay bricks. But I was only nineteen or twenty years old and took it to heart. My aching bones kept asking me this question: "Exactly just how much do we need to work to 'earn our own keep'?" I didn't have any luxuries—a hot shower

was a luxury for us back then when we were issued two shower-tickets per month—and I didn't want any. All I wanted was an exact account of the necessities that are essential for the maintenance of basic life, so that with the rest of my time I could be free to work on the weird sequences of sound called English. I never found an answer to my question. Until that smoggy afternoon in 1981, when Dr. White threw the paperback on my desk.

Thoreau offered a detailed account of his life of "voluntary poverty" and "simplicity" by Walden Pond, using ledger book format, being accurate to the quarter of a penny. Despite the hard struggle with Thoreau's complex sentences, the pattern of which I hadn't mastered on the scaffolding, I slowly figured out that like me, Thoreau was vexed by the question of "how to get my living honestly with freedom left for my proper pursuits." In New England, where the winter can be as cold as that of Beijing though the summer not as muggy, Thoreau proved with his own experience that the true necessities of life include only four items—food, clothing, shelter, and fuel. In summer, Thoreau bathed in the pond every morning, but he mentioned no hot showers. Perhaps no more than two a month? Thoreau argued that if you don't eat hard, you don't have to work hard to earn your keep. I had intuited that much myself but bricklaying was a powerful appetite-sharpener, and it had made the job of earning my keep particularly hard. If the Party hadn't assigned me to be the apprentice of a bricklayer in the first place, I wouldn't have had to feel so guilty about being unable to repay the Party for its generosity! Near the end of "Economy," the opening chapter of *Walden*, in sentences that I could understand perfectly, the hard-nosed New England empiricist drops the bomb: "For more than five years I maintained myself thus solely by the labor of my hands, and I found that, by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living. The whole of my winters, as well as most of my summers I had free and clear for study." I knew it! I knew that the Party had been cheating us! But

I didn't know exactly how much. Yet the New Englander's ledger book quantified my suspicion. By "the labor of my hands," Thoreau often meant carpentry. Ah, the carpenter, brother of the bricklayer! I felt encouraged particularly by Thoreau's disclaimer: "I brag for humanity rather than for myself" What one man can do, another can. I, a Chinese bricklayer, was not crazy to dream of one day being able to read works of English and U.S. literature in the original language! We, the bellboy translator, the farmhand diplomat, the soldier poet, and the corn-mill worker philosopher, were not insane. We were just human beings dreaming the dreams of humanity. If only we could economize our lives! If only we could concentrate our energy on our "proper pursuits!"

Our immediate "proper pursuit" was to break the spine of that book, dividing it into twenty sections. We all wanted to read it, but we read English so slowly that it made taking turns impractical. "Everybody is to type fifteen pages," I said. "On stencil paper." The stencils I collected next Monday were in at least three different sizes and of five different brands. But, hey, it was Thoreau whom we read. "Fashion does not concern me," bragged Thoreau, "I am after truth." We mimeographed twenty-two copies and started devouring Thoreau with a "savage delight" that would put to shame Thoreau's "strange thrill" in contemplating devouring a woodchuck raw.

The confidence Thoreau had awakened in us supported me through college in China and graduate school in the U.S. Now I always tell my students that the critical consensus on the New

England transcendentalists as a group of "Seers and Sayers" does not paint the full picture. And that among them there is at least one "Doer," someone who Does and encourages you to Do something with your life, no matter how crazy it may appear Thoreau makes a distinction between philosophers and professors of philosophy. For him professors of philosophy may have subtle ideas or even start their own school, but that is far from being enough to make them true philosophers. One must love wisdom so as to live according to its dictates to transcend the professor and to reach the level of a philosopher. As a professor and the holder of a Ph.D., I try to be conscientious about practicing what I preach. I avoid driving whenever I can. For the past decade my means of transportation to and from the university has been the city bus. Taking the suggestion of a student, I began to walk to work in the spring quarter of 2004. I am not as young or enthusiastic as I was twenty-five years ago, but I still feel the influence of the spring, the morning of the year to Thoreau. It is a time to be constantly reawakened. As "the very globe continually transcends and translates itself," so must we constantly start dating "new eras" in our lives. My decision to walk to work is a professor's humble effort to "translate" myself into a true philosopher. It's also a Doer's attempt to celebrate this year, 2004, the sesquicentennial anniversary of *Walden* (1854).

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