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Dwellings as Cultural Mirrors: A Comparative Study of the Dwelling Imagery of Walden and Border Town

Jinhui Wang*

School of Translation Studies, Shandong University, Weihai, China

**Corresponding author: Jinhui Wang.*

Abstract

This paper undertakes a cross-cultural comparative analysis of the log cabin in Thoreau's Walden and the stilted house in Shen Congwen's Border Town, treating these architectural motifs as cultural indices that reveal how distinct civilizational traditions shape the spiritual connotations and axiological orientations of dwelling imagery. The cabin in Walden operates as a material instantiation of American Transcendentalism and its individualistic ethos: through voluntary sequestration, it enacts a symbolic return to the natural order while registering a critical disengagement from industrial modernity. Its cultural rationality resides in the conviction that spiritual lucidity is attainable only through spatial removal from the collective. The stilted house in Border Town, by marked contrast, is thoroughly embedded in the indigenous topography and ethical lineage of rural Xiangxi, functioning as a spatial actualization of the Confucian precept that morality is enacted through the quotidian fabric of familial and communal relations. Its configuration—suspended over water and clustered in neighborly propinquity—materializes collective memory, interpersonal reciprocity, and filial devotion, all undergirded by a cosmology in which household harmony mirrors the polity and human existence is coeval with nature. Though both dwelling images partake of the literary topos of "home", they instantiate two incommensurable cultural psychologies: one oriented toward self-consummation through solitude, the other toward ethical constitution through relational embeddedness. This paper illuminates dwelling imagery as a repository of cultural identity and advances a spatially grounded hermeneutic paradigm for cross-cultural literary inquiry.

Keywords

Walden, border town, dwelling imagery, cross-cultural literary studies, philosophies of nature

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, widely regarded as a masterpiece of American literature and a foundational text of American nature writing. "Thoreau's assiduous attention to natural details was first and foremost a literary achievement in marked distinction from the other writers' vague symbolic valuations" [1]. The book chronicles the author's self-imposed sojourn in a log cabin of his own construction on the shores of Walden Pond. Through meticulous observations of the surrounding environment and his daily existence, Thoreau articulates a sustained meditation on the virtues of existential simplicity and a philosophy attuned to

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the rhythms of the natural world. Shen Congwen's *Border Town*, a classic of modern Chinese literature, portrays the distinctive customs and human drama of the small town of Chadong in western Hunan, centering on the tragic love story of the protagonist Cuicui. Although the novel does not explicitly foreground the cabin as a central motif, its ubiquitous stilted houses—vernacular wooden structures raised above the water's edge—constitute a dwelling image functionally and symbolically analogous to Thoreau's cabin.

Both the cabin in *Walden* and the stilted houses in *Border Town* may be categorized under what Zou Jianjun and Du Xueqin (2009) have identified as "dwelling imagery"—man-made structures situated within rural or urban landscapes that nonetheless remain organically continuous with the natural environment [2]. Despite their divergent cultural genealogies and historical moments, the two works converge in their shared engagement with the relationship between humanity and nature—a relationship that, as Wang Yan (2019) observes, may be understood along two phenomenological axes: nature signifies the physical world in its phenomenal dimension, and it connotes the innate disposition of the human subject in its psychological dimension [3]. Both texts give rise to distinctive dwelling images that invite sustained comparative scrutiny. The cabin that Thoreau erects with his own hands, and the stilted houses that dot the riverscape of Chadong, are by no means mere backdrops for human activity; they are richly charged with symbolic resonance and cultural significance. A parallel comparative investigation of these dwelling images promises to: (1) elucidate the symbolic valences embedded in the cabin/stilted house motif; (2) illuminate the respective relationships between the dwelling, its inhabitants, and the surrounding natural world; and (3) reveal the thematic functions these images perform within the larger architectonics of each work, thereby disclosing both the commonalities and divergences that characterize literary production across distinct civilizational contexts.

1.2 Literature Review

As a canonical work of American nature writing, *Walden* has attracted extensive scholarly attention both domestically and internationally. In Western academia, Lawrence Buell (1995), in *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, offers a penetrating examination of the nexus between nature and culture in Thoreau's oeuvre, emphasizing the formative influence of *Walden* on the trajectory of American nature writing [4]. Scholarship on *Walden* has adopted diverse perspectives, as seen in studies such as Deak Nabers' examination of Thoreau's "natural constitution" [5] and Richard Grusin's exploration of extravagance within the framework of natural economy [6]. Domestic scholarship on Thoreau's *Walden* in China has coalesced around conception of nature [7] and ecocriticism [8], Transcendentalist philosophy [9], cross-cultural parallels with Daoism [10] and its pragmatic reconfiguration [11], as well as aesthetic interpretation through atmospheric [12] and chromatic lenses [13]. Additional contributions have addressed his social critique [14]. Despite this rich body of scholarship, however, the cabin imagery in Walden—as a distinct cultural signifier—has remained undertheorized, with systematic examination of this architectural motif constituting a notable lacuna.

Shen Congwen's *Border Town*, a masterpiece of modern Chinese literature, has likewise generated a rich and diverse body of scholarly inquiry. Ling Yu (1992), in *From Border Town to the World*, offers a systematic exposition of Shen's creative vision and the cultural underpinnings of *Border Town* [15]. Recent scholarship on Shen Congwen's *Border Town* has witnessed a notable diversification of critical perspectives. Liang Jianxian (2018) approaches the work from the standpoint of subjective spiritual constitution, examining the aesthetic realm and its articulation of the author's intellectual disposition [16]. Deng Xiaoyan (2024) situates *Border Town* within the spatial matrix of southwestern market towns and native-soil geography, probing the literary imagination of village communities as refracted through the lens of vernacular fiction [17]. Liu Yuejie (2024), adopting a Daoist philosophical framework, undertakes a comparative reading of *Border Town* and Hardy's novels, elucidating the eco-holistic literary construction that emerges from their respective engagements with nature [18]. Collectively, these inquiries have expanded the hermeneutic horizons of *Border Town* along multiple axes, opening up new avenues for interpretation while leaving the work's central dwelling image—the stilted house—as a site still awaiting sustained critical attention.

Within the broader critical discourse on the imagery of *Border Town*, scholarly attention has been disproportionately directed toward the white pagoda [19], water imagery [20], and zoological and botanical motifs. With respect to the stilted house itself, existing studies have generally confined themselves to identifying it as a metonymic representation of Xiangxi indigenous life, emblematic of local traditions, interpersonal patterns, and Shen Congwen's affective attachment to his native culture.

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Comparative studies of the two authors have also emerged in recent decades. Yang Quan (2007) has conducted a comparative examination of water imagery in *Border Town* and *Walden* [20], while Ge Pei (2016) has undertaken a comparative analysis of the two works from the perspective of Romantic literary thought [21]. However, despite these contributions, comparative scholarship focusing specifically on the dwelling imagery in *Walden* and *Border Town* remains conspicuously sparse. Existing studies have largely concentrated on overarching thematic concerns, character typologies, and water imagery, leaving the cabin and the stilted house as a paired site of comparative inquiry largely unexplored. It is precisely from this critical lacuna that the present study proceeds, undertaking a comparative analysis of the dwelling images in the two works with the aim of disclosing the cultural significations and literary values that they respectively embody and collectively illuminate.

2. The Symbolic Significance of Dwelling Imagery in *Walden* and *Border Town*

Imagery in literary discourse functions as a primary conduit through which authors externalize their intellectual commitments and thematic investments. Constituted as a synthetic union of the immanent "meaning" and the externalized "figure", literary imagery enables writers to render their profoundest sensibilities with heightened immediacy and rhetorical force. Adopting a parallel comparative framework and taking the dwelling image as its analytical point of ingress, the present section proceeds by scrutinizing the textual figurations of the cabin and the stilted house in the two works respectively, in order to unearth the distinctive symbolic registers they respectively inhabit. Sections 2, 3 and 4 will comparatively analyze the cabin in *Walden* and the stilted house in *Border Town* from such dimensions as symbolic significance (including spatial posture, cultural logic, attitude toward modern civilization, etc.), relationship with nature, and relationship with characters (see Table 1).

Table 1: The Cabin vs. The Stilted House

	The Cabin in *Walden*	**The Stilted House in *Border Town***
Core symbolic register	Emblem of spiritual freedom and self-realization	Emblem of regional culture and traditional sentiment
Spatial posture	Seclusion and self-fashioning; a calculated spiritual distanciation, a willed suspension of the self between social existence and the wild	Witness and connectivity; embedded within a nexus of familial and communal relations
Cultural logic	Western individualist culture, foregrounding personal agency and independent ratiocination	Chinese vernacular culture, privileging regional cultural continuity, collective modes of existence, and relational embeddedness
Attitude toward modern civilization	Cultural critique: a sustained and penetrating reflection upon the manifold deficiencies of modern civilization; resistance against the endemic maladies of industrial modernity	Cultural preservation: a symbol of the endurance of Xiangxi's regional heritage and the steadfast maintenance of its traditional lifeways
Relationship with nature	Organic continuity with nature; habitation and habitat become mutually constitutive; a locus of spiritual illumination	Symbiotic cohabitation with nature; adaptation to local topography and climatic conditions; the principle of the oneness of heaven and humanity
Relationship with characters	Forges an autonomous intellect animated by critical rationality; a buffer zone reinforcing individual autonomy	Silent witness to Cuicui's psychological and affective development; a material instantiation of kinship and communal relations; ethical transmission

2.1 The Cabin in *Walden*: Emblem of Spiritual Freedom and Self-realization

As regards the architectural configuration and situatedness of Thoreau's dwelling, he erected his cabin with his own hands upon the shores of Walden Pond, selecting a site nestled amid dense woodlands and lapped by crystalline waters. He meticulously sourced timber and, through the sheer exertion of his own labor and inventiveness, raised a habitation of elemental simplicity—every material drawn from the immediate environs, such that the very process of building itself amounted to an act of profound communion with and immersion in the natural order. The total expenditure for the entire structure came to barely more than twenty-eight dollars, while its interior afforded a mere fourteen square meters of living space—a dimension falling drastically short of any conventional standard of domestic sufficiency. Yet this ostensibly hermitic dwelling, far from being

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sequestered in any genuine geographic sense, lay within a mere twenty-minute stroll (roughly one mile) of the nearest neighbor and at no considerable remove from Concord, where his mother made her home [22]. The cabin at Walden Pond, in other words, represented not a literal flight from civilization but rather a calculated spiritual distanciation—a willed suspension of the self between the familiar precincts of social existence and the magnetic pull of the wild. In electing to establish this unassuming shelter as a mediating threshold, Thoreau secured sustained intimacy with the natural world without committing to an irrevocable severance from the human community. The unique construction and situatedness of Thoreau's dwelling thus reveal not only a natural affinity with the wilderness but also a deliberate spiritual posture—one that laid the material groundwork for his broader project of self-realization.

Serving as a profound emblem of spiritual freedom and self-realization, the cabin in *Walden* that Thoreau erects with his own hands stands as a potent symbol of his emancipation from the fetters of social convention and his unremitting quest for spiritual autonomy. Mid-nineteenth-century America witnessed an accelerating tide of industrialization, accompanied by an escalating fervor for material accumulation—a current in which individuals found themselves increasingly adrift, their sense of self eroded by the very prosperity they pursued. "Thoreau went to live at Walden Pond in search of an organic and spiritual economy of nature with which to supplant the arbitrary and profane marketplace economy imposed by antebellum capitalism" [6] It was against this backdrop that Thoreau elected to build his cabin on the shores of Walden Pond and take up solitary residence, as he said:

"*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear;*" [23]

Yet the cabin, situated between the forest and the lake, lay within a mere twenty-minute walk of the nearest neighbor—a gesture that signified, in essence, a deliberate spiritual distanciation rather than any literal geographical withdrawal. The cabin thus afforded him an autonomous space for unfettered contemplation and for the exploration of nature and self alike. Here, he observed the lake's seasonal transformations, recorded the comings and goings of birds and beasts in the surrounding woods, and engaged in sustained dialogue with the natural world at the most intimate proximity. Sustained by a material existence reduced to its barest essentials, he cultivated an intellectual and spiritual life of remarkable richness—and in so doing, realized his steadfast aspiration toward genuine spiritual emancipation. Thoreau's residency feelings can be witnessed like:

"*I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another. What do we want most to dwell near to? Not to many men surely, the depot, the post-office, the bar-room, the meeting-house, the school-house, the grocery, Beacon Hill, or the Five Points, where men most congregate, but to the perennial source of our life, whence in all our experience we have found that to issue, as the willow stands near the water and sends out its roots in that direction.*" [23]

Meanwhile, the cabin also functions as a symbol of existential simplicity and a sharp critique of modern civilization. With his cabin serving as a pivotal boundary, on one side lay the clamorous precincts of Concord, on the other the untrodden vastness of the natural world. The cabin's austere construction and frugal interior arrangement embodied Thoreau's dedication to a life of deliberate simplicity while simultaneously registering a trenchant critique of the reigning materialist orthodoxy of his age. Confined to a narrow space furnished with only the barest essentials—the greater part of which he drew directly from the surrounding landscape—Thoreau cultivated his own provisions and fabricated his own tools, reconciling himself to the satisfaction of only the most elementary human needs while steadfastly repudiating the luxuries and superfluities that modern civilization had come to proffer.

Materials and building process:

"*Near the end of March, 1845, I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by Walden Pond, nearest to where I intended to build my house, and began to cut down some tall, arrow white pines, still in their youth, for timber.*" [23]

Interior space:

"*When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter,*

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but was merely a defence against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough, weather-stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night. The upright white hewn studs and freshly planed door and window casings gave it a clean and airy look, especially in the morning, when its timbers were saturated with dew, so that I fancied that by noon some sweet gum would exude from them." [23]

He believed that "*Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul.*" [23]

This mode of existence gives unequivocal voice to his profound disaffection with modern civilization's unbridled pursuit of material gratification at the systematic neglect of spiritual nourishment. The cabin thus endures as a lasting testament to his unwavering fidelity to a life of intentional simplicity and his sustained resistance against the endemic maladies of industrial modernity.

2.2 The Stilted House in *Border Town*: Emblem of Regional Culture and Traditional Sentiment

In *Border Town*, Shen Congwen renders the local habitational landscape in the following manner:

"*When autumn and winter arrived, dwellings on the cliffs and by the water came clearly into view—not one could escape notice. Walls of yellow earth and pitch-black tiles, neatly placed there for all time and in harmony with the surroundings on every side, brought the viewer a sense of extraordinary joy.*" [24]

The dwelling imagery in *Border Town* materializes in the form of the stilted wooden house, a vernacular architectural typology endemic to western Hunan, conventionally erected against mountain slopes and along the margins of waterways. Constructed predominantly of timber framing, with a substantial portion of its structural mass cantilevered beyond its foundation, this architectural idiom constitutes a remarkably judicious response to the region's rugged topography and subtropical clime—affording efficacious protection against dampness, optimizing natural airflow, and minimizing the occupation of scarce arable land. The stilted house, however, is by no means a mere utilitarian shelter; it operates concurrently as the epicenter of domestic life and the focal point of communal intercourse. Its internal spatial organization materially encodes the hierarchical framework of Confucian family ethics: the elder generation is installed in the upper quarters, while the junior members inhabit the lower reaches. Furthermore, its interstitial and peripheral spaces—the verandas, balconies, and open-air terraces—actively facilitate neighborly sociability, transforming the stilted house from a strictly private abode into a pivotal node within the intricate web of local social relations.

Beyond its architectural functionality, the stilted house in *Border Town* stands as a quintessential emblem of Xiangxi's regional culture, encapsulating the distinctive wisdom and lifeways of the locality. The unique geographical environment and the rich tapestry of ethnic traditions in western Hunan have given rise to this distinctive architectural form. Typically erected against mountain slopes and along the edges of waterways, the stilted house represents a subtle and ingenious adaptation to the local topography and climatic conditions—embodying the wisdom of the Xiangxi people in their resourceful utilization of the natural environment and their enduring commitment to harmonious coexistence with it. At the same time, the stilted house serves as a living repository of traditional Xiangxi lifeways. Within its precincts, the rhythms of daily existence unfold in accordance with the age-old cycles of dawn and dusk, sustaining hereditary practices of farming and fishing that have been transmitted across generations. Neighborly reciprocity and mutual assistance flourish, giving rise to a distinctive social ethos of rustic simplicity and tightly knit communal solidarity. The domestic scenes of Cuicui and her grandfather in the stilted house, for instance, are imbued with a palpable atmosphere of native vitality, evoking the tranquility and equilibrium that characterize traditional life in Xiangxi.

This cultural and social significance, however, is inextricably intertwined with a deeper emotional dimension: for the inhabitants of *Border Town*, the stilted house is far more than a mere dwelling—it is the very anchor of their native sentiment, the material embodiment of home as a locus of warmth and belonging. Wherever the people of *Border Town* may roam, the image of the stilted house remains indelibly imprinted upon their hearts. Moreover, the lifeworld engendered by the stilted house nurtures the pure-hearted, unassuming, and morally sincere dispositions of characters such as Cuicui and her grandfather. As Shen Congwen once declared, "*I only want to build a small Greek temple, and what it enshrines is ihuman nature*" [25]. Cuicui grows up within the stilted house, enveloped by her grandfather's tender care and the ambiance of neighborly harmony; her innocence, guilelessness, and innate goodness resonate in perfect accord with the

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humane ideals that the stilted house symbolizes. The stilted house thus becomes, in Shen Congwen's literary vision, a poignant symbol of the beauty of human nature as it exists in Xiangxi—standing in stark and deliberate contrast to the indifference and utilitarianism that he perceived as endemic to modern society.

2.3 A Comparative Analysis of Dwelling Imagery: Similarities and Differences

In *Walden* and *Border Town*, the rustic cabin and the stilted house respectively function as symbolic embodiments of their authors' aspirational visions of an ideal existence: Thoreau, within the confines of his woodland shelter, pursues spiritual self-reliance and a life of deliberate austerity, while Shen Congwen, through his evocation of the stilted dwelling, delineates a portrait of traditional Xiangxi life suffused with serenity, communal concord, and the luminosity of human goodness. Both writers, via these domestic images, articulate a form of transcendence over the contingencies of their contemporary realities and gesture toward an alternative ontological order. Furthermore, both dwellings are intimately conjoined with their natural environs, each in its distinctive manner manifesting a harmonious reciprocity between humanity and nature. Thoreau's cabin, situated on the forested shores of Walden Pond, is seamlessly integrated into the ecological fabric of its setting; the Xiangxi stilted house, poised against mountain slopes and along waterways, is ingeniously adapted to the topographic contours and climatic exigencies of its locale. In both instances, the habitation registers a profound deference to and accommodation of the natural world—a shared authorial commitment to the ideal of symbiotic coexistence between the human and the non-human realms.

Nevertheless, the symbolic valences of the two domestic images diverge in significant respects. The cabin at *Walden* foregrounds the primacy of individual autonomy, serving as the spatial locus of Thoreau's personal spiritual inquiry and existential experimentation, thereby lending material form to a distinctly Western individualistic cultural ethos. The stilted house in *Border Town*, by contrast, is embedded within a nexus of familial and communal relations, functioning as a carrier of collective life and cultural transmission, and reflecting the defining characteristics of traditional Chinese rural society with its profound emphasis on interpersonal bonds and lineal continuity. Moreover, the cabin operates as an instrument of cultural critique: through his physical withdrawal from the epicenter of modern civilization, Thoreau registers a sustained and penetrating reflection upon its manifold deficiencies. The stilted house, in stark opposition, is oriented toward cultural preservation—it stands as a symbol of the endurance of Xiangxi's regional heritage and the steadfast maintenance of its traditional lifeways, expressing Shen Congwen's deep-seated attachment to and valorization of his native culture.

In synthesizing these observations, the divergent symbolic significations of the dwelling images in the two works are fundamentally rooted in their respective cultural matrices. The cabin in *Walden* draws its symbolic resonance from the wellsprings of Western individualist culture, foregrounding the individual's pursuit of spiritual emancipation and critical engagement with modern civilization—an emphasis that reflects the Western cultural valorization of personal agency and independent ratiocination. The stilted house in *Border Town*, by contrast, derives its symbolic import from the traditions of Chinese vernacular culture, privileging regional cultural continuity, collective modes of existence, and the illumination of human goodness—a constellation of values that bespeaks the Chinese cultural appreciation for community, native soil, and inherited moral precepts. These divergent symbolic configurations ultimately arise from fundamentally disparate cultural understandings of the meaning of life and the ultimate ends of human striving.

3. Analysis of the Relationship between Dwelling and Characters

3.1 The Cabin in *Walden* and Its Relationship with the Protagonist

The cabin exerts a profound and formative influence on Thoreau's character development and spiritual maturation. The solitary life within its walls compels him to confront a succession of practical challenges—erecting the structure, cultivating crops, weathering the inclemencies of the seasons—each of which serves to cultivate in him a disposition of resilience and self-reliance. Simultaneously, the cabin's pervasive tranquility affords him ample time and spatial latitude for sustained contemplative engagement. Within this haven, he reads, writes, and subjects to critical scrutiny a wide array of concerns pertaining to nature, human existence, and the organization of society—a regimen of intellectual labor that further consolidates his identity as an autonomous thinker. His meticulous observations of natural phenomena and his probing reflections on the

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relationship between humanity and the natural world, conducted from the vantage point of the cabin, give rise to a distinctive philosophy of nature and a coherent body of ecological thought.

Beyond its role in shaping his inner character, the cabin also functions as a buffer zone insulating Thoreau from the clamor and distractions of the outside world, thereby reinforcing his individual autonomy. In the context of mid-nineteenth-century America—a society increasingly consumed by the pursuit of material wealth and enmeshed in competitive emulation—Thoreau elects to take up solitary residence in the cabin, withdrawing from the demands of social intercourse and the entanglements of worldly affairs in order to devote himself single-mindedly to personal growth and spiritual inquiry. The cabin, in this regard, enables him to preserve clarity of mind against the encroachment of prevailing social values, empowering him to pursue with unwavering resolve the ideal life to which he has inwardly aspired.

3.2 The Stilted House in *Border Town* and Its Relationship with the Characters

The stilted house functions as a silent witness to Cuicui's psychological and affective development, constituting the very cradle of her maturation—a domestic sphere within which she undergoes her gradual metamorphosis from an artless and untroubled maiden into a young woman compelled to navigate the turbulent vicissitudes of amorous experience. Within its precincts, she passes her untroubled childhood in the company of her grandfather—a space suffused with her laughter, her play, and her youthful aspirations. As she matures, it is within the stilted house that her tender and inchoate affection for Nuosong first stirs; the dwelling becomes the repository of her emotional life. It is here that she awaits Nuosong's return, her hopes, perplexities, and anguish all intimately intertwined with this wooden structure. The novel repeatedly depicts Cuicui gazing from the stilted house toward the ferry crossing, lost in thoughts of Nuosong—scenes that vividly attest to the profound entanglement of the dwelling with the trajectory of her emotional development.

The stilted house further operates as a material instantiation of kinship and communal relations, transcending its ostensible function as the domestic sphere shared by Cuicui and her grandfather to constitute the very embodiment of the profound filial bond that unites them. Within its confines, the grandfather tenderly nurtures Cuicui, imparting to her the skills of daily life and the precepts of moral conduct, while Cuicui in turn keeps him company and assists him in the household chores to the best of her ability. Moreover, the stilted house functions as a microcosm of the broader social fabric of Border Town, where the interstices of its architecture—the corridors, balconies, and open platforms—facilitate neighborly interaction and mutual assistance, giving rise to a cohesive communal ethos. The novel's depictions of neighbors visiting one another across adjacent stilted houses, exchanging news and sharing the minutiae of daily existence, illustrate the dense web of social relations that is both enabled and sustained by this distinctive dwelling form.

A comparative interpretation of the two works reveals that the cabin in *Walden* and the stilted house in *Border Town*, despite their shared function as formative domestic spaces, are grounded in profoundly divergent cultural logics. In *Walden*, the cabin operates through seclusion and self-fashioning: as a physical and spiritual bulwark, it extricates Thoreau from societal clamor, compelling him to confront existential challenges in solitude—building, farming, observing nature—wherein pragmatic labor intertwines with contemplation to forge an autonomous intellect animated by critical rationality. The cabin's enclosure paradoxically enables expansiveness of thought, serving as both sanctuary and incubator for the critical subject. In *Border Town*, the stilted house is defined by witness and connectivity: rather than isolating Cuicui, it situates her at the nexus of kinship and communal affections, inscribing her developmental trajectory from innocence to first love, while facilitating neighborly intercourse and ethical transmission, wherein individual destiny acquires meaning through collective immersion. In essence, the former achieves spiritual autonomy through spatial seclusion—embodying the Western individualist paradigm that self-realization necessitates withdrawal from society; the latter nurtures emotional integration through spatial openness—manifesting the Chinese agrarian ideal that human flourishing is inseparable from relational embeddedness. These symbolic configurations arise from disparate cultural ontologies concerning human existence—one finding achievement in the self-sufficient, critically discerning subject apart from society, the other in harmonious integration within a cohesive social order sustained by inherited moral precepts and affective bonds.

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4. Analysis of the Relationship between Dwelling and Nature

4.1 *Walden*: The Cabin and the Organic Continuity with Nature

In *Walden*, the cabin and its natural environs are conjoined in a state of such profound and heightened harmony that their integration transcends mere spatial adjacency to approximate an organic continuum—a symbiotic unity in which habitation and habitat become mutually constitutive.

Thoreau's cabin is deeply interfused with the natural world, and his entire mode of existence bears eloquent testimony to a immersion in and reliance upon the surrounding environment. Situated amid the woodlands that fringe Walden Pond, the cabin is enveloped by an abundance of natural resources that furnish the material substratum of his subsistence. He procures timber from the forest for the construction of his dwelling, cultivates crops along the lake's edge, and sustains himself wholly on the produce of the land. Simultaneously, he participates actively in the rhythms of the natural order, observing the inexorable succession of seasons and coexisting in harmonious reciprocity with the flora and fauna that share his domain. "Thoreau's aesthetics as relational and reciprocal. That is, they prove sensitive to the personal feelings that objects of attention engender, while retaining a commitment to rendering the object's features as accurately and vividly as possible" [26]. In his writing, his meticulous chronicles of Walden Pond's metamorphoses across the seasonal round, together with his attentive documentation of the habits and rhythms of the surrounding plants and animals, attest to a disposition that regards the self not as an external observer but as an integral constituent of the natural world—one whose own temporal cadence is attuned to the deeper pulse of the ecological totality. As Thoreau portrays:

> "*The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus is but the outside of the earth everywhere.*" [23]

The cabin functions not merely as a shelter for physical existence but as a veritable locus of spiritual illumination—a site wherein Thoreau derives profound insight from his sustained and meditative engagement with the natural order. In the enveloping quietude of the cabin, his observations and reflections upon the phenomenal world yield revelations concerning the fundamental patterns of existence and the essential truths of life. Every phenomenon within his purview—the rippling surface of the lake, the hush of the forest, the perpetuation of animal life through endless cycles of generation and regeneration—becomes a wellspring of philosophical inquiry and a touchstone for sustained meditations on the meaning and ends of human existence. The reflections on nature that he commits to paper within the cabin's confines, including his memorably rendered observation that "*saw how I could let the years run of, bufet the winter through, and see the spring come in*" [23], give eloquent voice to the profound comprehension of life's cyclical renewal and the indomitable persistence of hope that he distills from his intimate communion with the natural world.

4.2 *Border Town*: The Stilted House and Symbiotic Cohabitation with Nature

The dwelling imagery in *Border Town* is likewise interdependent with its natural surroundings, manifesting a relationship of symbiotic cohabitation.

> "*On winter days, clothes and green vegetables could be seen drying in the sun in front of every doorway. Sweet potatoes hung from the eaves by their vines. Bags made from palm-bark rain capes, stufed with chestnuts and hazelnuts, also hung under the eaves. Chickens big and little disported themselves by every house, cackling. Here and there would be a man sitting on the high doorsill of his house or splitting logs with an ax, stacking his firewood in the courtyard in neat piles like pagodas.*" [24]

The stilted house in *Border Town* fully manifests the architectural wisdom of the Xiangxi people in their adaptation to the natural environment. Constructed in accordance with the contours of the mountains and the flow of the waterways, and built with locally abundant timber resources, its distinctive semi-elevated structure is admirably suited to the region's mountainous terrain and humid climate, while simultaneously avoiding excessive disruption to the natural topography. This mode of construction embodies the principle of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature, representing the accumulated wisdom of the Xiangxi people throughout their long history of interaction with the natural world. The elevated lower story, for instance, affords protection against dampness and vermin while optimizing spatial utilization and minimizing damage to the vegetation of the hillsides.

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Yet the relationship between the stilted house and nature extends far beyond mere architectural adaptation; the natural environment exerts a profound influence upon the lives and characters of those who inhabit these dwellings. The verdant mountains and limpid waters of Xiangxi provide the denizens of *Border Town* with a picturesque living environment and an abundance of natural resources, such that their productive and daily activities are intimately interwoven with the natural order. Cuicui's grandfather, for example, sustains himself by ferrying passengers across the river—the watercourse serving as the very foundation of his livelihood. Cuicui, meanwhile, plays by the stream and gathers saxifrage leaves; the flowers and trees of the natural landscape become integral to her daily existence. Furthermore, fluctuations in the natural environment affect both the emotional lives and the temporal rhythms of those dwelling in the stilted houses. When natural calamities such as torrential rains or floods descend upon the region, the people of *Border Town* join forces in collective response and mutual assistance—an experience that serves to reinforce the affective bonds and social cohesion that unite them.

A synoptic comparison of the two works exposes points of affinity alongside their divergences. As Deng Xiaoyan (2024) observes, "Shen Congwen's depictions of market days evince a powerful inclination toward the return to nature—an impulse that aligns him with Thoreau's retreat into the wilderness and with the many Western naturalists who have fled civilization. Yet Shen remains distinctly Chinese in his orientation: his nature is not the wilderness, not something remote and distant, but rather something immediate and close at hand—the nature of one's native soil."[17] In both works, the relationship between the dwelling and the natural world attests to an intimate bond between humanity and nature, yet with distinct emphases. *Walden* foregrounds humanity's active exploration of and spiritual elevation through nature: it is through profound immersion in the natural order that Thoreau derives his spiritual revelations—a stance that reflects the Western cultural disposition toward rational inquiry into and spiritual pursuit of the natural world. *Border Town*, by contrast, emphasizes a harmonious coexistence with nature in which the natural environment exerts a formative influence on the lives and emotional landscapes of its characters. This orientation embodies the traditional Chinese philosophical principle of the oneness of heaven and humanity, underscoring the mutual interdependence and reciprocal influence between human existence and the natural world.

5. Dwelling Imagery in *Walden* and *Border Town*: The Textual Materialization of Cultural Implications

5.1 The Cabin in *Walden*: Embodiment of Western Individualism and Natural Philosophy

The cabin in *Walden* is, first and foremost, an act of spiritual sovereignty enacted through spatial means. Thoreau did not inhabit the cabin out of economic necessity, but as a deliberate choice—a calculated transaction of minimal material expenditure for maximal psychic autonomy. His labor of felling timber, constructing the dwelling, and cultivating the soil constituted a corporeal enactment of independence: not an abstract avowal of self-reliance, but a gradual, incremental extrication of the self from social dependency, forged through axe and loam. The site of the cabin is equally revelatory: "Thoreau's cabin by Walden Pond was actually situated near the railroad tracks, allowing him free passage between wilderness and town" [12]. His ecological thought evinces a pronounced pragmatic disposition. His chosen retreat lay a mere half-hour's stroll from the village [11]—close enough that he could keep one foot in the familiar fields, while the other still stood upon the threshold of Concord, yet sufficiently remote to constitute a palpable boundary. This spatial interval corresponds precisely to the spiritual condition to which Thoreau aspired: to abide within civilization without being subsumed by it. Within the cabin's confines, he recorded ledgers, observed the lake's thaw, and listened to the nocturnal calls of birds—mundane activities that, filtered through the lens of solitude, were transfigured into rites of almost liturgical gravity. This experiment in existence, predicated upon the individual as the fundamental unit, is deeply rooted in the Western Enlightenment's exaltation of individual rationality and autonomy, and bears the imprint of Emerson's Transcendentalist thought [9]—the cabin serving simultaneously as vessel and as manifesto.

Simultaneously, the cabin operates as an experimental laboratory for Thoreau's practice of natural philosophy. Deeply indebted to Emerson's influence [27], he regarded nature not as a storehouse of resources awaiting human exploitation, but as a sacred text open to hermeneutic perusal. From the vantage of his lakeside cabin, Thoreau undertook meticulous observations of the multifarious phenomena of nature—the martial encounters of ants, the gambols of loons, and the chromatic vicissitudes of the pon's surface. These

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observations, which might appear desultory, in fact constitute his fundamental epistemic method: the substitution of embodied "presence" for detached "spectatorship", and of immediate sensory experience for deductive inference, thereby engendering a vital and authentic wisdom of nature. The cabin serves as the advance outpost from which nature's primordial truths—more ancient and more reliable than any product of human civilization—may be approached. Through his life of Spartan simplicity by the pond, Thoreau levelled a trenchant critique against the hypertrophy of material appetite and the concomitant atrophy of spiritual life in industrial society. In sum, the cabin is simultaneously the practical domain of individual independence and the embodied expression of natural philosophy—the two dimensions being mutually constitutive and analytically inseparable, together constituting the core of Thoreau's Walden experiment.

5.2 The Stilted House in *Border Town*: The Radiance of Chinese Tradition and Vernacular Sentiment

If Thoreau's cabin epitomizes a "conscious solitude," then the stilted houses in *Border Town* manifest the enduring ethos of traditional Chinese culture and native-place sentimentality. Unlike the existential detachment of Walden Pond, Shen Congwen's wooden dwellings are not isolated structures suspended between heaven and earth; rather, they are seamlessly embedded within the integral fabric of life in Chadong Township. The architectural configuration of these houses—half abutting the stream bank and half standing in the water—is by no means a mere product of utilitarian expediency. Instead, it embodies a reciprocal cohabitation between humanity and the natural landscape, giving tangible form to the quintessentially Chinese wisdom of adapting to local conditions and conforming to the contours of one's environment.Within the narrative universe of *Border Town*, the stilted houses never appear as reified, autonomous motifs; they are intrinsically interwoven with the flowing creek, the white pagoda, and the ferryboat, collectively constituting a warm and unpretentious realm of communal human relations. The dwelling shared by Cuicui and her grandfather is transparent and open, devoid of defensive barriers, thereby establishing a subtle yet significant contrast with Thoreau's unlocked cabin: whereas Thoreau's openness signifies a willful disengagement from civilization, the permeability of the Chadong house reflects the unmediated and guileless interactions characteristic of traditional agrarian society.

Moreover, the stilted house serves as a spatial embodiment of familial ethics and intergenerational tenderness. The grandfather and granddaughter inhabit this abode, and the quotidian scenes of their daily routine transform familial affection into an experience both containable and nourishing, rendering the dwelling a moral space suffused with emotional bonds. Architecturally, the wooden structure, with its distinctive Hunan-West vernacular features—including bracketed eaves and intricately carved ornamentation—manifests a vernacular aesthetic sensibility that is never ostentatiously contrived but emerges organically from the rhythms of daily life, hospitality, and ritual observance.In sum, the wooden house in *Border Town* transcends its function as a mere geographical shelter; it evolves into a cultural matrix that nurtures and perpetuates the humane sentiments, ethical precepts, and regional memories of Western Hunan. It ultimately stands as a tender and vibrant literary epitome of pastoral China—a locus where tradition, affect, and habitation converge in enduring harmony.

6. The Cultural Roots Underlying the Dwelling Imagery

6.1 Western Cultural Influences on the Cabin Imagery in *Walden*

The ideology of individualism constitutes the foundational cultural matrix out of which the cabin imagery in Walden is hewn. Western individualism enshrines the sovereign autonomy of the individual and the imperative of self-realization as its cardinal tenets. "Thoreau's ecological thought, however, remains centered upon the self, objectifying nature as a means of resolving his own existential concerns" [11]. Thoreau deliberately chose to build his cabin on the lakeshore and to live by his own labor, exchanging minimal material dependency for maximal spiritual sovereignty. The cabin was not merely a shelter, but a silent declaration issued from his individual position against the entirety of social convention—a testament to the conviction that one's life need not be contingent upon external institutions to acquire fullness of meaning.

Transcendentalist philosophy infuses the cabin with a deeper spiritual import—one that resides not merely in its inheritance of Emersonian thought, with its affirmation of nature's sacrality and its conceptualization of

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the cabin as a "practical field" for the intuitive apprehension of truth, but more significantly in its critical transcendence of the anthropocentric orientation latent within Emerson's own framework. Thoreau effectuates a decisive shift from Emerson's ontological inquiry into "what nature is" to an ethical interrogation of "how I ought to relate to nature", transposing the philosophical question into the register of praxis. Through a poetics of embodied writing—manifest in such figurations as the "transparent body" and the "phenomenal sonority of corporeal experience"—Thoreau systematically dismantles the subject-object binary that has long structured the human-nature relation, effectuating, through the confluence of sensory immersion and perceptual attunement, a mode of aesthetic contemplation that is radically de-anthropocentrized. This reconceptualization reconfigures the lakeside cabin not simply as a site of Transcendentalist practice, but as a spiritual laboratory for the exploration of subject-object ethics—a space in which the very parameters of human-nature relationality are subjected to experimental refashioning [27].

Beyond these philosophical foundations, the cultural critique precipitated by the nineteenth-century context of industrialization constitutes the historical impetus for Thoreau's cabin experiment. The expansion of American industry in the nineteenth century brought not only material prosperity but also environmental degradation and the alienation of human nature. Thoreau's experiment in simple living, conducted from the cabin as his base, was both a resistance against this trajectory and an imagining of an alternative—an attempt to demonstrate that human existence could achieve a balance between material minimalism and spiritual abundance that diverged from the prevailing logic of industrial civilization.

6.2 Chinese Traditional Cultural Influences on the Stilted House Imagery in *Border Town*

In contradistinction to the Western cultural emphasis on individual autonomy, the influence of traditional Chinese culture upon the stilt-house in *Border Town* assumes a configuration of Daoist-Confucian complementarity. "Daoist spirit and Confucian thought together constitute the two spiritual pillars of Shen Congwen's literary creation, embodying the dual aspiration of the Chinese intellectual toward 'transcendence from the world' and 'engagement with the world'—an aspiration that, on the one hand, advocates a return to the spontaneity of nature and a quest for spiritual anchorage, and on the other, pursues the beauty of human harmony and emphasizes social cohesion" [16]. These two seemingly divergent orientations toward life find a unified and concrete spatial expression in the stilted house imagery of *Border Town*.

The Daoist wisdom of "modeling oneself upon the spontaneous operation of nature" constitutes the most fundamental principle governing the construction of the stilted house: Daoist philosophy emphasizes the principles of following the way of nature and the oneness of heaven and humanity. The Daoist conception of nature finds its articulation in the "nature" portrayed by Shen Congwen [18]. The Xiangxi stilted house, constructed against mountains and alongside waterways, conforming to topography and adapting to circumstances, is itself a material expression of following the way of nature—not seeking to transform nature, but finding a place of abode within its folds, pursuing the harmonious unity of humanity and nature. The daily rhythms of the people in border town, lived within the stilted houses and synchronized with the changing seasons of the landscape, resonate with the Daoist attitude of "following the spontaneous course of things".

If Daoism furnishes the mode of the stilt-house's relationship with nature, then Confucian ethics endow this space with the warmth of human sentiment. Confucianism emphasizes interpersonal relations and familial ethics, stressing moral cultivation and social order. The stilted house in *Border Town* is never merely a private dwelling; it is simultaneously a carrier of family order and a hub of neighborly exchange. The spatial configuration in which grandparents and grandchildren coexist, and in which seniority is ordered, embodies the Confucian ethical order founded upon the family. The open doors, the coming and going of ferry passengers, and the mutual care among neighbors allow "benevolence" and "propriety" to receive their most unadorned expression in daily life. Through his depiction of life in the stilted houses, Shen Congwen reveals the inheritance and practice of traditional Confucian morality in the native-soil society.

The indigenous cultural traditions of Xiangxi further endow the stilt-house with a distinctive regional aesthetic and a mnemonic function. The unique geographical environment and ethnic cultures of Xiangxi have given rise to the architectural style and way of life embodied in the stilted house. The customs of minority peoples and their folk arts are integrated into the culture of the stilted house, making it a concentrated expression of Xiangxi's regional culture—a vessel that carries the historical memory, beliefs, and emotions of the local people. It is at once a practical dwelling and a condensed cultural specimen of the region: the festivals,

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songs, beliefs, and memories of the ethnic groups all find preservation in the grain of the timber and the resonance of the floorboards.

7. Conclusion

The cabin in *Walden* and the stilted house in *Border Town*, though situated in disparate cultural contexts and historical epochs, equally serve as literary spaces in which their respective authors inscribe their visions of an ideal mode of existence—responding to the spiritual predicaments of their ages through two distinct spatial configurations: that of solitary seclusion and that of communal congregation. Thoreau's cabin stands as a material manifesto of individualism and a practice ground for Transcendentalist natural philosophy—it purchases spiritual purity through insulation from social clamor, enacts a critical distanciation from modern civilization, and embodies the Western epistemological tradition that regards nature as the wellspring of truth. Shen Congwen's stilted house, by contrast, is a spatial crystallization of Xiangxi's regional culture and a vessel of native-soil ethics—embedded between mountain and human sentiment, it sustains through its open doors a network of affective warmth encompassing family, neighbors, and passing ferry travelers, bearing the imprint of human warmth and the Daoist wisdom of "dwelling in accord with nature", while refracting the deeper cultural logic of "dwelling as ethics" that permeates Chinese tradition. In the relationship between dwelling and inhabitant, Thoreau's cabin points toward spiritual self-sufficiency and individual growth, whereas the stilted house weaves its characters into the ethical fabric of family and community. In their engagement with nature, the former pursues an immersive, all-encompassing fusion, while the latter manifests a gentler, symbiotic rhythm of cohabitation. These two dwelling images, in their very divergence, enter into dialogue with one another, and in their respective singularity, reflect the profound intertwinement of literature and culture. This comparative study not only opens a new point of entry into the understanding of these two classics, but also illuminates the potential inherent in cross-cultural literary inquiry of "seeing the large through the small"—for from a single cabin, we may glimpse two civilizations' distinct answers to the perennial question of how human beings ought to live.

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