

TAO YUAN-MING AS REFLECTED IN HIS POETRY

by

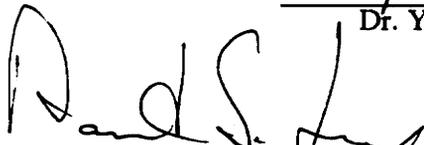
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(ABSTRACT)

T'ao Yüan-ming (365-427 A.D.) remains China's greatest medieval poet. While no adequate biographical sources exist, the poet's own work presents the most intimate picture of T'ao Yüan-ming himself, in addition to reflecting various aspects of his historical and cultural era. This essay explores T'ao Yüan-ming's character as reflected in his verse. When poised against a broader historical and cultural background, T'ao Yüan-ming's poetry goes furthest in revealing the poet as an individual as well as a product of his times.

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historical and cultural details, but also led me to valuable, specific source materials. Their contributions have greatly improved the overall integrity of this essay.

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Vita **92**

Introduction

In a civilization filled with cultural heroes, T'ao Yüan-ming¹ (365-427 A.D.) continues to hold a special place. One of the first great poets in the Chinese tradition, T'ao Yüan-ming also became legendary for his rejection of worldly life in preference for rural solitude. As such he is not only recognized as a great poet, but also as an important member of the Chinese sage-recluse tradition.

T'ao Yüan-ming's most basic biography may be outlined as follows. He was born in 365 to a relatively minor scholar-official family and lived near the town of Hsün-yang in the Ch'ai-sang district (modern day Kiukiang, Kiangsi Province). He seems to have married twice (his first wife dying), had five sons and at least one daughter. His poetry reflects five different official positions held between 395-405, after which he retired for the remainder of his life, composing the majority of his surviving work during this period.² T'ao lived directly in the

¹ Also known as T'ao Ch'ien.

² A.R. Davis, *T'ao Yüan-ming (AD 365-427): His Works and Their Meaning*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); vol.I, 5-10, 65 (poem #22), 79-90; vol.II, 24, 170-192 (translation of dynastic histories and commentary). As throughout this thesis, I am greatly indebted to Mr. Davis for a

middle of the Period of Disunity (220-589), an era of great chaos that spanned some 369 years between the Han and Sui dynasties. So divisive was this period, and of such great length, that modern historians regard the eventual reunification of China as a unique miracle in the history of the world. It would be analogous to Rome rising after its fall. T'ao and his contemporaries probably had no idea that China would indeed reunify one day to continue the imperial tradition for another millennia and more, for the political and military chaos of their world indicated only factionalism and ruin.

The differing fates of T'ao Yüan-ming and two of his creative contemporaries illuminate something about the reactions of educated scholar-officials during this period. Hsieh Ling-yün (385-433), traditionally the founder of "landscape poetry," played a dangerous political game his entire life, retiring intermittently, but making significant enemies throughout his participation in social and political circles. He suffered banishments to remote regions of southern China and finally died at the hands of an executioner. Ku K'ai-chih (ca. 344-406), China's first great landscape painter and also quite a public figure, seems to have feigned madness in order to avoid the tragedy that often befell more serious social and political participants, such as Hsieh Ling-yün. Ku was recognized as an artistic genius, but also as a fool. His bizarre behavior probably reflected a technique for surviving in his dangerous political and social world. On the other hand, after alternating between political service and private

wealth of historiographical information. Though I disagree with his overall interpretation of T'ao Yüan-ming's life, I nevertheless rely on Mr. Davis' scholarship concerning many individual facts and references, such as the dating of certain poems or the many classical allusions in T'ao Yüan-ming's work.

farming for ten years, T'ao Yüan-ming retired in 405 for the rest of his life, writing many poems, living a peaceful life, and dying a fairly old man. By withdrawing from the world, T'ao escaped the dangers of public life and won a permanent place in the Chinese sage-recluse tradition. But beneath the sage-recluse tradition, T'ao's reclusive behavior stemmed from a much deeper level of his character. For all his obvious rejection of his social and political milieu, T'ao ultimately withdrew for very personal reasons.

The Chinese sage-recluse tradition began as early as the eleventh-century B.C. when the brothers Po-i and Shu-ch'í refused to relinquish their loyalty to the fallen Shang dynasty, choosing to starve to death rather than serve the succeeding Chou kingdom. Between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C. both the Taoist and Confucian schools began to canonize the sage-recluse tradition. Scholars and artists who felt neglected by their cultural environment participated in this tradition by citing various precedents, from Po-i and Shu-ch'í to Confucius himself, to bolster their own cause of rejecting a worldly life. Ch'ü Yüan (third century B.C.?) contributed one of the earliest poems to the sage-recluse tradition when he wrote the *Li Ssu* ("Encountering Sorrow"), which depicted his autobiographical plight of a lonely, unappreciated scholar-official. The sage-recluse tradition continued to draw upon these early poetic and philosophical foundations, up to the time of T'ao Yüan-ming and beyond.

To a certain extent T'ao Yüan-ming relied upon the sage-recluse tradition to support his own reclusive instincts. By the third and fourth centuries A.D. he could cite quite a number of neglected scholars who withdrew from the world,

and probably drew quite heavily upon this tradition during the early stages of his retirement.³ But, nevertheless, T'ao ultimately retired for very personal reasons. He was a true loner, living by himself in his own creative world. Besides, a popular cultural tradition, no matter how rich, could not always sustain a seclusion characterized by the medieval Chinese farmer's daily toil, a toil T'ao experienced throughout his retirement. Such circumstances starkly offset any romanticism that might have accompanied the sage-recluse tradition. Thus, to an important extent, T'ao went beyond his cultural milieu to embrace profound reclusive ideals that lay at the core of his true nature.

T'ao Yüan-ming's work was not particularly appreciated during his own lifetime, and little in the way of contemporary biographical information is available about him. Quite appropriately, perhaps, for a solitary, reclusive individual, T'ao Yüan-ming left behind as much mystery as anything else. Nothing approaching a definitive biography, such as those written about later T'ang poets or even Hsieh Ling-yün will likely ever appear. Biographical source material simply remains inadequate. But T'ao's verse offers many possibilities for understanding at least part of the poet's life, for these poems reflect his reactions to certain situations and events, such as his various official positions, his house burning down (in 408 or 418), or Liu Yü's capture of Ch'ang-an in 417. Even more important, T'ao's poems contain much personal emotion that reflects the poet's character and personality. But in any case, it is only through T'ao

³ Davis, vol.I, 136.

Yüan-ming's poetry -- viewed in its historical and cultural context -- that approximations of his biography can be written.

As a primary historical source, poetry can be both intriguing and elusive. By nature, poetry interpretation is impressionistic, and often even an individual reader, given enough time and readings, will alternate between several possible interpretations of any given poem. Still, for all its limitations, poetry can be a delightful source of intimate biographical information. As the novelist and poet John Fowles wrote, "[p]oetry . . . is normally a good deal more revealing of the writer than prose fiction. The poem is saying what you are and feel." And again, "[i]t is rather difficult to put one's private self into a novel; it is rather difficult to keep it out of a poem." Finally: "A poet's audience is his or her own self."⁴ And it was because poetry revealed a person's feelings that, to an important extent, the Chinese used verse composition in the imperial civil service examination. The Chinese emphasized that poetry should come from the writer's heart,⁵ and thus examinees disclosed their personal emotion (and, by extension, their character) when writing on particular topics.

Of course poets and poetry in Chinese culture need to be appreciated in their own right. Composing verse was certainly not limited to "poets," since all scholar-officials wrote poetry and were educated in poetry. Even certain emperors (such Wu Ti of the Han dynasty) composed good poems, and scholars still regard general Ts'ao Ts'ao, the leader of the Wei kingdom, as a very fine

⁴ John Fowles, *Poems*, (New York: Ecco Press, 1973), viii.

⁵ Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 87.

poet. Therefore, many traditional Chinese "poets" actually did much more than compose verse. Also, certain forms of verse, such as the *fu* "prose-poem," perhaps only approximate a modern, Western conception of poetry. In fact, no Chinese equivalent for the generic "poetry" really exists, verse being referred to by its form name, such as *fu*, or *shih*. These considerations in mind, a modern reader may still share many aspects of the historical Chinese poet's world.

In terms of poetic style, T'ao Yüan-ming's main contribution lay in his innovative use of the five-word *shih* form. His five-word *shih* stand out, among other reasons, for their tremendous expression of personal emotion, virtually unprecedented in the Chinese poetic tradition. In this sense his work marked the beginning of a new era, an era that would reach its peak in that greatest age of Chinese poetry, the T'ang dynasty (618-906). But even the T'ang poet Li Po (701-762), one of the two greatest Chinese poets ever (along with Tu Fu, 712-770), did not necessarily reveal much about his life story in his verse. While without rival in stylistic expertise, Li Po nevertheless tended "to be impersonal in tone and to reveal relatively little about [his] own activities."⁶ On the other hand, T'ao Yüan-ming was very personal in tone and revealed a significant amount about his own activities. In this sense even modern readers may derive a fairly deep understanding of the man behind the verse.

⁶ Burton Watson, *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry: From Early Times to the Thirteenth Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 206.

Chapter 1 - Historical Background

Chinese history begins in the northern loess uplands near the Yellow River sometime during the eighteenth-century B.C. The Shang dynasty oracle bone inscriptions mark China's first true civilization, arising out a Neolithic cultural base. What characterized the Shang as China's first true civilization was, among other features, its writing, highly sophisticated bronze metallurgy (as yet unsurpassed in the world), cereal grain agriculture, and a centralized religious and political hierarchy that dominated a number of specialized communities. For traditional Chinese historians, the Shang succeeded the Hsia dynasty (probably an actual Neolithic kingdom of sorts) and lasted until the Chou conquest around 1066 B.C.

The Chou people came from west of the Shang settlements, conquering the Shang people militarily and politically, but not disrupting Shang culture. Instead, by gaining a new religious-political legitimacy, the advent of the Chou kingdom

might be described as a modification and refinement of Shang culture.¹ After conquering the Shang by force, Chou rulers sustained their leadership through a new concept of legitimacy. They attributed much more power and authority to the concept of *t'ien*, Heaven, and thus depicted the ruler as *t'ien tzu*, Son of Heaven who possessed the *t'ien ming*, or the Mandate of Heaven that enabled him to rule. Possibly these concepts developed on the fringes of the Shang kingdom prior to the actual Chou conquest. Also, it appears that the Chou rulers exploited these new concepts during a political void they created by transporting the Shang rulers east of the empire.² In any case, from the Chou period forward, all the way down to this century, these important concepts characterized Chinese rulership.

In addition to new concepts of political legitimacy, the Chou age (ca.1066 B.C. - 221 B.C.) also witnessed a significant refinement of Shang patrimonialism, giving rise to a unique Chinese "feudalism." This political structure differed most notably from European feudalism in being based upon personal, kinship ties rather than contractual ones.³ As in the Shang period, the political structure merely extended from the family structure, only now it became much more sophisticated and widespread. In fact, with the growth and extension of such a system over a wider geographical range came the dilution of kinship ties,

¹ Herrlee G. Creel, *The Origins of Statecraft in China*, vol. I, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), page 93.

² Creel, 55, 82, 86-87.

³ Creel, 338, 345, 376-378, 381, 384-387.

contributing to warlord era (known as the Warring States Period, 446 B.C. - 221 B.C.) that characterized the late Chou.

Besides political development, important agricultural and economic advancements also characterized the Chou. The advent of iron tools revolutionized farming, and trade grew much more extensive among more specialized and wider-spread communities. A larger non-productive administrative class dominated farmers and craftsmen as class distinction became more pronounced. But for all these social, political, agricultural, and economic developments, the Chou became most famous for its philosophical thought, winning acknowledgement as China's "Classical Age."

The Chou's late Spring and Autumn Period (771 B.C. - 481 B.C.) and Warring States Period (481 B.C. - 221 B.C.) became famous in Chinese history as the era of the "Hundred Schools." Increasing strife and warfare contributed to the rise of many schools of political and social thought, such as Confucianism, Taoism, Legalism, Mohism, Naturalism, and the Logicians. All these groups sought to solve early China's disunity. Later, during the Han dynasty's first century, the Han Synthesis would incorporate elements of Legalism and Naturalism into a predominant Confucian political and social framework that would underlie Chinese thinking from then on.

In addition to Confucianism, the later Chou also witnessed the advent of Taoism, Chinese culture's other main branch of philosophical thought. Confucianism and Taoism would consequently characterize the "split personality

of the Chinese intellectual."⁴ It was not uncommon for scholar-officials to switch between Confucianism and Taoism depending upon personal and political circumstances. While the imperial government came to utilize Confucianism as a sort of bureaucratic philosophy, Taoism remained mystical and otherworldly and thus more of a "retirement" philosophy.⁵ Taoism and Confucianism became intricately interwoven into the entire Chinese political and social structure, with gentry families based in both rural and urban areas, economic support being derived from their tenant-farmed agricultural lands and political participation practiced in a central or regional administrative center. Scholar-officials belonging to these families might find themselves in the city or countryside depending upon personal and/or political circumstances - and therefore could practice either Confucianism or Taoism depending upon their circumstances.⁶ Thus, if one had money, the Taoist hermit ideal might not prove as austere as it would initially seem.

But the Taoist/Confucian interplay went much further than mere political circumstance. Where Confucianism, by necessity, operated according to set social and political rules, Taoism offered a liberating, personal means of thought and expression. No wonder Taoism became the haven of artists and poets.

⁴ Chi Li, "The Changing Concept of the Recluse in Chinese Literature," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 24 (1962-1963): 235.

⁵ This dichotomy, while generally applicable, nevertheless risks oversimplifying a very complex philosophical reality. To be sure, certain central concepts (such as *tao* and *wu wei*) were intermixed within "Confucianism" and "Taoism" themselves, and Taoism also interacted with Legalism and Mohism to some degree. For an excellent recent study exploring these complexities, see Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, chapters 1, 3, and 6 in general, and particularly pages 62, 188, 190-191, 237.

⁶ Wolfram Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers: Social Forces in Medieval China*, (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1965), pages 44-45.

Confucianism did not readily lend itself to creativity.⁷ Nevertheless, even though artists might lean toward Taoism, Taoism and Confucianism were often intermixed, complimenting each other in Chinese culture as a whole. In the most prosperous eras, the happiest Chinese were probably able to strike a balance between the two, even playing a Confucian role during the course of an official day, retreating to a personal Taoism by night. Too much emphasis on Taoism or Confucianism often indicated some sort of greater disharmony. The mixing of Taoism and Confucianism (giving rise to "Neo-Taoism") during the Period of Disunity may be seen as both a response to an outdated, merely scholastic Confucianism that had come to characterize the late Han, as well as a reflection of the following decades' political chaos. T'ao Yüan-ming's poetry reflects a more personal conflict involving Confucianism and Taoism, stemming from aspects of his own character, but also indicative of his era.

Here an important aspect of Taoism should be noted. A distinction is made between two separate Taoist movements, conveniently termed "religious" Taoism (*tao chiao*) and "philosophical" Taoism (*tao chia*).⁸ They were quite different. Philosophical Taoism pertained primarily to the teachings of two people: Lao-tzu (sixth century B.C.?) and Chuang-tzu (probably fourth century B.C.). These teachings were mystical, philosophical, and tended to be the interest of educated scholars. On the other hand, religious Taoism was magical, superstitious, preoccupied with attaining immortality, and tended to be popular among the

⁷ Li, "The Changing Concept of the Recluse," 247.

⁸ Schwartz, 186.

masses, though gentry involvement was by no means unusual.⁹ In fact, by the third and fourth centuries of T'ao Yüan-ming's lifetime, religious Taoism culminated in a widespread popularity that included many of the elite, especially those associated with the developing art of calligraphy.¹⁰ The common roots of both philosophical and religious Taoism lay in the works of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu¹¹ but even in basic interpretation they immediately diverged. What was mystical and required intuitive understanding for philosophical Taoism, religious Taoism exploited for its magico-superstitious base, thus utilizing what many had previously regarded as merely obscure. The important thing to note in relation to T'ao Yüan-ming was that he rejected religious Taoism -- its quests for immortality and the like -- altogether.¹² His work, however, profoundly reflects the influence of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu. Thus the Taoist aspect of T'ao Yüan-ming must be understood in terms of philosophical Taoism.

To return to history. The late Chou saw an ever-increasing trend toward centralization, culminating in 221 B.C. with the triumph of China's first centralized dynasty, the Ch'in. In 221 B.C. Ch'in Shih Huang proclaimed himself the first emperor of China, beginning the dynastic tradition that would essentially last until the end of the Ch'ing dynasty in 1901. Ch'in Shih Huang proceeded to

⁹ Richard Mather, trans., *Shih-shuo Hsin-Yü: A New Account of Tales of the World*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), xxvi.

¹⁰ Donald Holzman, *Poetry and Politics: The Life and Works of Juan Chi (A.D. 210-263)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 149; J.D. Frodsham, *The Murmuring Stream: The Life and Works of the Chinese Nature Poet Hsieh Ling-yün (385-433)*, *Duke of K'ang Lo*, 2 vols., (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1967), 5.

¹¹ Respectively, the *Tao Te Ching* (or *Lao-tzu*) and the *Chuang-tzu*.

¹² Davis, vol. I, 4, 10, 63, 152.

rule for a harsh fourteen years. Among his accomplishments were linking together many northern walls into the Great Wall, standardizing weights, measures, and axle length (important for uniform wear on China's growing road system), and - perhaps most important of all - standardization of the Chinese written script. Continuing to the present day, the Chinese script has provided an important continuity throughout Chinese history, helping the Chinese culture endure for even very lengthy periods of disruption, factionalism, and "barbarian" invasion, such as that which occurred during the Period of Disunity's 369 years. However, despite the importance of standardizing the written script and his other positive accomplishments, Ch'in Shih Huang has come down through history with a reputation as a notorious dictator.

Ch'in Shih Huang built the Great Wall only at the cost of thousands of lives, expending workers rapidly under abominable working conditions. He purportedly buried alive hundreds of scholars who dared to criticize his regime, and he conducted one of the most infamous book-burnings in all Chinese history. The hundreds of life-sized terra cotta soldiers and horses excavated from around Ch'in Shih Huang's tomb in north China have recently exemplified the extent of his demagoguery. Passions ran high against such an autocrat, and one noted assassin tried to kill Ch'in Shih Huang. T'ao Yüan-ming immortalized this event in his poem, "Singing of Ching K'o"¹³ where he describes Ching K'o as a man who "plainly knew that once gone, he would not return / But that there would be fame

¹³ "Singing of Ching K'o" (#53). For convenience sake, all poems quoted in this thesis are taken from A.R. Davis' volume I. Davis' numbering follows the traditional ordering of T'ao's poems established sometime relatively soon after the poet's death.

among later generations." And, indeed, even though Ching K'ò failed in his assassination attempt and died in the process, T'ao Yüan-ming states, "For the man, although he perished / After a thousand years feeling remains." By T'ao Yüan-ming's era, Ch'in Shih Huang's notoriety had endured six hundred years.

The Chinese could not tolerate Ch'in Shih Huang's harsh rule for long and by 207 B.C. a petty official named Liu Pang led an uprising that helped overthrow the Ch'in dynasty, laying the foundation for the great Han dynasty (202 B.C. - 220 A.D.). The Han dynasty (actually two dynasties, the Eastern Han, 202 B.C. - 8 A.D., and the Western Han, 25 A.D. - 220 A.D.) lasted over 400 years and brought early China to its greatest heights of civilization. During the Han important developments were made in political organization and the beginnings of a scholar-gentry class trained in the Confucian Classics. This period saw "Han Confucianism" rise from among several contending schools of philosophical thought to form the core of the Han Synthesis. And though the Civil Service Examination never approached the systematization and expansion developed during the T'ang dynasty (618-907), the roots of this system are to be found at least as early as second-century Han.¹⁴ As China's first great dynasty, the Han fell heir to the Ch'in's centralized bureaucracy and an unprecedentedly broad concept of nationalism among the Chinese. Transportation and communication were better than ever, as was military might, reflected in the "Hsiung-nu Wars" waged against the Huns between 135 B.C. - 57 B.C. A general growth in population, agricultural and economic production, and thus greater tax

¹⁴ Creel, 7, 17.

revenue for the wealth of the empire, helped foster the growth of the central government, as well as the development of scholarship and a literati. In such an environment cultural activities thrived.

During the Han the first great Chinese historian, Ssu-ma Ch'ien (ca. 147-90 B.C.), began the tradition of Chinese official history. His remarkable work, the *Shih Chi*, or *Historical Records*, became the model for historical writing that would influence Chinese historians over the next two thousand years. This work contained several innovations in historiography, including the systematic compilation of biographical sketches and greater attribution of causation to human action rather than fate. It continued the strongly didactic function of history and enhanced the cyclical view of history that came to dominate Chinese historical thinking. Subsequent scholars, including T'ao Yüan-ming, would all read the *Shih Chi* as part of their education. Many of T'ao's poems trace sources and subjects back to this work, including "Singing of Ching K'ò," mentioned earlier.¹⁵ He also wrote a nine-poem series inspired directly by the *Shih Chi* called "Written After Reading History," in which he cited examples of ideal moral conduct. For instance, T'ao wrote of Po-i and Shu-ch'i, two brothers Confucius praised for retiring to the mountains when the Shang dynasty fell, choosing to stave to death rather than serve the new regime:¹⁶

The two sons resigned their kingdom,
And led one another to the bay of the sea.
When Heaven and men changed the mandate [of Heaven],
They quite the world and lived in poverty.
Plucking ferns, they sang a lofty song;

¹⁵ See *Shih Chi*, chapter 86; translated in Davis, vol. I, page 149-150.

¹⁶ For historical references, see *Shih-chi* 61, in Burton Watson, trans., *Records of the Historian: Chapters From the Shih chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 11-15.

Sadly they thought of Huang[-ü] and Yü.
Pure morals far outstrip the ordinary,
So that they may move the spiritless.
["Written After Reading History" (#1)]

To some extent T'ao seems to have looked to history for comfort and vindication of his own non-conformist life, as when he praised Chang Ch'ang-kung, a Han dynasty official who could not reconcile himself with his political milieu:¹⁷

Remote was Ch'ang-kung!
Untroubled by anything.
'The world's ways are diverse;
All are alien to me.'
He hung up his reins and went away;
In solitude cultivated his ideals.
He kept apart from the rest of his life;
Who understood his intention?
["Written After Reading History" (#IX)]

On the other hand, T'ao seemed to have a genuine affection for tales from the past. In writing of other historical figures, such as the Han dynasty officials Shu Kuang and Shu Shou or Duke Mu of the Ch'in dynasty,¹⁸ T'ao could admire them simply as brave or virtuous men without necessarily identifying himself with them. "He approved them as men outstandingly different from the general run, but he could not have seen them as those whose lives had a close affinity with his own."¹⁹ In any case, by reading and writing about history, T'ao Yüan-ming participated in a great Chinese cultural tradition that greatly esteemed history and historians.

The invention of paper in 100 A.D. greatly facilitated literary pursuits and other important developments involving the written word. A popular form of

¹⁷ *Shih-chi*, 102. See Burton Watson, trans., *Records of the Grand Historian of China Translated From the Shih chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien*, 2 vols., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), vol.I, 539; Davis, vol.I, 218.

¹⁸ "Singing of the Two Shus (#51) and "Singing of Three Good Men" (#52).

¹⁹ Davis, vol.I, 145.

information was realized in the rise of encyclopedias, among the most notable being the *Shan Hai Ching* or *Book of Mountains and Sea*. Though traditionally regarded as a book of geography (and it does focus on geography as well as the plant and animal kingdoms), the *Shan Hai Ching* contained much in the way of popular mythology and can be appreciated today as much for its literary fantasy as anything else. It was this aspect of fantasy that T'ao drew upon in composing his series of thirteen poems, "Reading the *Shan Hai Ching*." The version of his day carried illustrations of romantic imagery that helped inspire him to create his own fantasy of escape to the land of mountains and sea.

For instance, T'ao began by writing, "I browse in the record of the King of Chou / I glance over the pictures of Hills and Seas / In a single look I exhaust the universe / If here I were not happy, what should I do?"²⁰ T'ao seems to have daydreamed about visiting this fantasy land, writing, "I grieve that I could not with Mu of Chou / Mount a carriage and pay a visit here."²¹ Perhaps such fantasizing provided T'ao with an emotional outlet, for he seems to have gained a certain amount of serenity:

Fluttering are the Three Green Birds;
Their plumage is strange and lovely.
In the morning they are messengers of the Queen Mother;
In the evening they return to the Three Peak Mountain.
I would like through these birds
Directly to tell the Queen Mother:
'In the world I need nothing,
Save only wine and long life.'
["Reading the *Shan-Hai-Ching*" (#54), V.]

Here T'ao revealed a playful, daydreaming aspect of himself not unrelated to his historical idealism. Both these aspects should be seen in light of T'ao

²⁰ "Reading the *Shan-Hai-Ching*" (#54), I.

²¹ "Reading the *Shan-Hai-Ching*" (#54), III.

Yüan-ming's era when the Han dynasty had long since fallen and a general mood of pessimism pervaded society.

The downfall of the Han came about because of two basic interrelated factors: social unrest and political disunity. Social unrest and peasant uprisings reflected a widening gap between rich and poor primarily caused by land concentration among the wealthy, a persistent problem in Chinese society dealt with most recently after the 1949 Communist Revolution. Factionalism and in-fighting divided the Han government itself and weakened its authority, leaving the way open for revolt and "barbarian" invaders. Despite seventy-eight years of war directed against the Hsiung-nu nomads, they were never completely suppressed. By the third century A.D. the Hsiung-nu arose in new force to exploit China's disintegrating political situation. Concentration of wealth among landed families contributed to the government's growing inability to care for the masses in times of natural disaster, such as famine caused by draught. The government grain supply was simply inadequate, having been depleted through landed estates dominating grain supply. Peasant uprisings increased after 126 A.D. until the great Yellow Turban Rebellion of 184, which marked the beginning of Han's downfall. Thereafter China was split between three kingdoms, the Wei, Wu, and Shu, none of which could gain control of the whole empire. Family cliques dominated the politics of these kingdoms and violence, factionalism, and in-fighting increased.

The Three Kingdoms period, a violent time in itself, only lasted about 40 years. In 249 the Ssu-ma family initiated a blood coup that toppled the Wei

kingdom (then the dominant of the Three Kingdoms), eventually establishing the Chin. Yet violence and intrigue continued within the Chin regime itself. The "War of the Eight Princes" began in 300 A.D. when one prince, seeking to usurp the feeble-minded emperor Hui, sparked a fratricidal war. Soon the dynasty, actually only a loose confederation to begin with, was drained of its vitality, becoming especially vulnerable to outside invasion.²²

By the early fourth century, northern and eastern tribes, including the Hsiung-nu and proto-Tibetan peoples, began to take advantage of a divided China. By 316 they had captured both of the Chin's capitals. This triggered one of the most massive migrations in Chinese history and thousands of gentry families fled south. Here a second Chin dynasty, the Eastern Chin, was established. The Eastern Chin was the regime that held power during most of T'ao Yüan-ming's lifetime. Its establishment transformed south China forever. Southern China, once an area only sparsely farmed by aborigines and a relatively few earlier Chinese immigrants, became the fourth and fifth centuries' stronghold of highest Asian culture.

Before moving beyond this initial historical context, it would be very instructive to try to look back upon China's history through T'ao Yüan-ming's eyes. To begin, "history" must have been something far different for T'ao Yüan-ming than what it is for modern scholars. What Ssu-ma Ch'ien wrote about the past was, in some crucial ways, quite far removed from strict, scientific history in a modern sense. Perhaps the most remarkable difference was the

²² Mather, *Shih-Shuo Hsin-Yü*, xvi.

strong didacticism throughout the *Shih-chi*. Learning and teaching "history" entailed far more than mere historical facts or analytical discernment, but instead set forth an entire moral tale, with a wide cast of characters reacting in a variety of ways to various events. The colorful dialogue that characterized the *Shih-chi* tales (not unlike Thucydides' work), helped distinguish "Ssu-ma Ch'ien's concept of history [as] essentially poetic." Moralistic Confucianism strongly influenced the *Shih-chi* and the social and cultural role of the Chinese historian was as "a kind of seer or prophet, an advisor who dramatize[d] his point with strange tales of the past."²³ Since Ssu-ma Ch'ien, in several fundamental ways, set the precedent for subsequent historical writing, his *Shih-chi* may stand as a good representation of traditional Chinese history in general. With an appreciation of these source materials, T'ao Yüan-ming's feeling for history might be imagined.

Throughout his poetry T'ao frequently refers back to the idyllic age of China's beginnings, a time when the cultural heroes Fu Hsi, Shen-nung, and Huang-ti lived, as well as the sage-kings Yao, Shun, and Yü. These legendary figures were credited with teaching people the first arts of civilization, such as the use of fire, fishing, hunting, agriculture, cooking, flood control, writing, and astronomy. To be sure, looking back to this "golden age" of cultural heroes became part of a greater Chinese historical tradition,²⁴ significantly influenced by Confucius himself who not only believed that these cultural heroes had embraced the ideal *tao*, but that studying them was essential for realizing wisdom in the

²³ Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien: Grand Historian of China*, (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1958), 74, 100.

²⁴ Similar to idealizing the Western Chou period (ca.1066 B.C. - 771 B.C.). See Creel, 28, 48.

present age.²⁵ Building upon such deep cultural reverence, T'ao Yüan-ming found in this legendary period a very personal ideal from which to gauge the comparably miserable state of affairs in the world that followed. This seems especially poignant when considering the era of acute chaos in which T'ao and his contemporaries found themselves. Most often, T'ao sadly longs for this idyllic age, lamenting his birth into the corrupted age of the fourth and fifth centuries. For instance, inspired by a spring walk, T'ao wrote:

Thus morning and evening
 I rest in this cottage.
 Flowers and herbs are in separate rows;
 Woods and bamboos form a screen.
 The shrill lute lies across its stand;
 The cloudy wine half fills the jar.
 Huang[tü] and [Yao] cannot be reached:
 Sadness only is mine.
 ["The Revolution of the Seasons" (#2)]

Similarly, T'ao wrote, "I was born after the end of [the idyllic Hsia, Shang, and Chou] / And with emotion I call to mind Huang and Yü"²⁶ and "[Fu-]hsi and [Shen-]nung are far in time from me / In my whole generation few 'return to the true [ways of the ancient past]'.²⁷ Still, T'ao did not always recall the ancients in sadness. Sometimes he sought to emulate their ideal, as when he wrote of farming: "Shun[-nung] ploughed with his own hand / Yü also sowed and reaped / In the Chou [dynasty] Records of long ago / The eight rules of government began with food."²⁸ And at least once he cited the ancients as his own wishful ancestors, indicating, among other things, his tremendous respect for them:

²⁵ Schwartz, 88, 98.

²⁶ "To Chief of Staff Yang" (#27).

²⁷ "Drinking Wine" (#42), XX.

²⁸ "To Encourage Farming" (#7), II.

"Ancient are our ancestors / Descended from [Yao] / In the remote past they were 'guests of Yü' / Successive generations added to their glory"²⁹ In any case, this legendary period was an important reference point for T'ao Yüan-ming. If he relied on Ssu-ma Ch'ien's scholarship at all he knew this period to be strictly mythological, but he seems to have derived a substantial amount of emotional support from it nonetheless. And though T'ao was certainly not alone in his admiration and idealization of the past, his poetic expression of such feeling begins to illuminate part of his character. A picture of T'ao the idealistic dreamer begins to emerge.

This brief historical overview, with some indication of T'ao Yüan-ming's own regard for it, sets the stage for a closer look at T'ao's more immediate geopolitical milieu. Other than T'ao's own poems, detailed evidence directly linking T'ao to his specific political service remains absent. But some important concepts may be inferred by examining the political picture and T'ao's personal reaction.

²⁹ "Charge to My Son" (#8).

Chapter 2 - Geopolitical Setting

As the northern gentry fled south during the early fourth-century, they crossed the great Yangtze, China's largest and most powerful river, and thus entered south China, a place vividly different from their northern homeland. Where north China was flat, brown, and dusty, south China was mountainous, lush, and rainy. The contrast between these two regions inspired Marco Polo, traveling in China during the thirteenth century, to give them entirely different names; calling north China "Cathay" and south China "Manji."¹

The migrating Chinese found a beautiful land punctuated by dramatic mountains, often jutting abruptly from surrounding lowlands or deep river gorges. The Chinese early regarded some mountains as sacred, and especially the Taoist tradition looked upon mountains as the home of sages or Immortals. Buddhism added further reverence, possibly helping to systematize the Chinese mountain-oriented philosophy with their construction of monasteries in such

¹ George Babcock Cressey, *China's Geographic Foundations*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1934), 13-14.

famous southern sites as Mt. Lu.² Southern China was the region that inspired Chinese landscape painting, an art developed for the first time in the world in southern medieval China.³ Many mountains, including Mt. Lu, arose near T'ao Yüan-ming's home. Thick forests and colorful flowers grew on these mountains and along the edges of the region's lakes and rivers. T'ao delighted in such splendid scenery, reflecting his love of the land's beauty and the serenity it brought him when he wrote,

From hills and mountains rise soaring peaks;
Gazed at from afar, all are rare and strange.
Fragrant chrysanthemums blaze, opening the woods;
Green pine-trees in line, crowning the cliffs.
I dwell on this pure and exquisite beauty,
Whose excellence stands out under the frost.
[From "Answering a Poem by Registrar Kuo" (#24), II.]

Official life required T'ao to leave his home, bringing him acute homesickness, and no wonder since his longing was tied to this exceptionally beautiful land.

For the northern refugees, however, early fourth-century south China presented several formidable challenges. The early fourth-century mass migration took place after many decades of incessant warfare and devastating famines. The population fluctuated between a tenth and a quarter of what it had been during the peak of Han dynasty prosperity, and people starved to death by the hundreds, sometimes even resorting to cannibalism. Subsequent preoccupation among southern gentry with recovering the north led to

² Burton Watson, *Chinese Lyricism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 79-80; Frodsham, 90.

³ Jacques Gernet, (J.R. Foster, trans.), *A History of Chinese Civilization*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 202.

concentration of manpower in the military and thus disrupted what grain distribution had begun.⁴

Beautiful, mountainous land that it was, south China's terrain imposed limits on agriculture not experienced on the northern plains. Aborigines occupied most existing lowlands, though a scattering of earlier Chinese immigrants could also be found. In addition to the Yangtze, other rivers sliced among the steep, forested mountains and agriculture, as it remains today, became limited to relatively scarce riverside lowlands.⁵ Chinese did manage, however, to make significant agricultural developments. New lands were cultivated, the agricultural economy expanded, and rice became a major staple for the first time.⁶

Earlier Chinese immigrants had settled mostly around the Yangtze basin area, the Canton plain, and certain coastal areas. Most of south China remained inhabited by various aborigines, such as the Yüeh, Yao, and Miao peoples (the latter, at least, still surviving as a minority in China today). Though the Chinese dominated these peoples and took possession of their lands, certainly nothing approaching genocide occurred. On the contrary, apparently much cultural exchange took place,⁷ typical of the relatively benign mutual acculturation that

⁴ Lien-sheng Yang, "Notes on the Economic History of the Chin Dynasty," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 9 (1945-1947): 113-114, 149, 170, 173.

⁵ Cressey, 323.

⁶ Wolfram Eberhard, *A History of China*, (Berkeley: University of California Pr., 1977), page 157; Witold Rodzinski, *The Walled Kingdom: A History of China From Antiquity to the Present*, (New York: The Free Press, 1984), page 73.

⁷ Gernet, 175; Eberhard, *A History of China*, 155-156.

characterized interactions between the “pure” Chinese culture and various outside cultures throughout Chinese history.⁸

A much more formidable challenge facing newly-arrived Chinese were the Chinese gentry families already established. These landed families met the early fourth century’s immigrants with condescension and rivalry. Where the southern gentry already had land and tended to be monied, many northern immigrants had little or no money, and all of them, of course, were without land. Invariably, previously settled gentry sought to dominate new arrivals.⁹ Such an atmosphere set the stage for the political struggles that plagued T’ao Yüan-ming’s era.

The history of South China during T’ao Yüan-ming’s lifetime presents a complicated picture of political intrigue and corruption, power struggles among family cliques, unsuccessful military campaigns to recover the north, land consolidation among the gentry that contributed to peasant uprisings, and general violence and danger. Factions and alliances among contending powers changed suddenly and unpredictably, leaving unfortunate officials on the wrong side as the new order fell into place.¹⁰ Before withdrawing from this chaos altogether, T’ao himself held four different official positions over a ten year

⁸ Creel, 60.

⁹ Gernet, 175; Eberhard, *A History of China*, 154-155, 157-158; Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, xvii.

¹⁰ E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhist in Early Medieval China*, (Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1972), page 216.

period (395-405). His short and shifting official career indicates something about T'ao Yüan-ming's personality, but the various positions he held under different rulers also reflect something about the era's disunified political reality.¹¹

Throughout the Han, particularly during the Eastern Han, gentry families gained more and more power, beginning with economic consolidation gained through land annexation, then moving into politics. Such power led to the development of virtually private armies, helping the great estates become almost self-contained social and economic centers.¹² In part, the concentration of wealth and population on landed estates may have contributed to the drop in official post-Han population figures, for only tax-paying landholders were registered in the census, not the tenant-peasants who lost their land - and what independence they had - to the gentry.¹³

The advent of the family clique as a distinct and powerful political force essentially began with the Han's downfall and the subsequent weakening of imperial political order. Because of kinship ties and the extension of family rule that characterized Chinese politics, family cliques probably always played some role in ruling the empire. However, after the mass migration south, family cliques became terribly powerful, developing to some of their most calculating and bloody extent during the Eastern Chin and Liu Sung dynasties of T'ao

¹¹ A further vivid testimony of the Chin dynasty's political chaos comes from a work of uncertain authorship written during this era, entitled *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü* or *Tales of the World*. Probably written for entertainment, the characters in this work are from high society - officials, emperors, military leaders, etc. - yet their bloody world of in-fighting and violence clearly depicts the reality faced by the gentry during this period. See Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, especially pages xii, xv-xvi, xviii.

¹² E-Tu Zen Sun and John DeFrancis, trans., *Chinese Social History: Translations of Selected Studies*, (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), 103-105, 137-140, 145, 149-151, 157.

¹³ Sun, 140-141.

Yüan-ming's lifetime. Landed families rose to unprecedented power, creating a truly aristocratic society. The new, huge estates not only posed a regular threat to central power, but also contributed to tensions among the gentry themselves, especially between older, landed families and northern emigres. Additionally, common farmers suffered considerable land deprivation, contributing to many peasant uprisings,¹⁴ the most well known led by Sun En in 399.

In more stable and unified times the emperor might hold enough power to participate in the power struggles that inevitably arose between various families, playing one against another to his own advantage. After the Han's downfall, however, the emperor typically became merely a puppet in the hands of the dominating family clique.¹⁵ Many of these emperors were mere children and most of them "ruled" for only a few years before some family leader or military strongman murdered them. Additionally, with the exception of the emperor Yüan (r.318-322), who founded the Eastern Chin in 317, emperors arrived as outsiders, Northerners, who succumbed to the more established and rapidly developing southern family cliques.¹⁶

Gentry expanded and developed their family cliques through arranged marriages. Patriarchs used their sons to attract new families into their group while daughters reinforced the network, marrying into families already aligned. As the network developed it became more complex and interlaced with more

¹⁴ Frodsham, 66; Gernet, 182; Kang-i Sun Chang, *Six Dynasties Poetry*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 19-20.

¹⁵ Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, 45.

¹⁶ Eberhard, *A History of China*, 158-159; Zürcher, 85-86.

marriages, involving more sons and daughters and nephews, nieces, and cousins as well. Additionally, as the gentry expanded their power faction they recruited from among the lower classes, incorporating people who became servants, spies, and concubines. Power struggles developed among contending factions as well as within individual cliques as so many different people sought supremacy. Among the dominant families during T'ao Yüan-ming's lifetime were the Huan, Hsieh, and Ssu-ma.¹⁷

Despite emperor Yüan's official role in establishing the Eastern Chin in 317, Wang Tao (276-339), leading the Wang family clique, carried the real power behind this new dynasty. Indeed, Wang Tao began organizing and synthesizing southern and recently-arrived northern gentry a full seven years before the establishment of the Eastern Chin. Real power remained in the Wang family's hands during and after emperor Yüan's reign.¹⁸ A popular saying, *wang yü ma kung t'ien hsia*, arose, literally meaning that the Wang and Ssu-ma families controlled China. The puppet emperor fooled no one.

Over the course of the Eastern Chin's first three decades (roughly 317 to mid-century) two of T'ao Yüan-ming's ancestors made political names for themselves. Most well known was T'ao's paternal great-great-grandfather¹⁹ T'ao K'an (259-334), who became governor of three southern provinces (modern day Hunan-Hupei, Kwangtung-Kwangsi area) under the title First Duke of

¹⁷ Eberhard, *A History of China*, 158-159; Zürcher, 86.

¹⁸ Zürcher, 85; Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 595.

¹⁹ According to A.R. Davis' reckoning. See Vol.II, 10.

Ch'ang-sha.²⁰ Also, T'ao's maternal grandfather, Meng Chia (fl. mid-fourth century), served as Chief of Staff to Huan Wen (312-373) who gained supremacy of the Eastern Chin around 346.²¹ T'ao later wrote a biographical essay of Meng Chia depicting him in somewhat idealized fashion. In addition to praising his grandfather as a virtuous man; modest, steadfast, and even-tempered, T'ao also portrays him as a lover of wine and, in his older years, someone who rejected office and retired "beneath a crossbeam door" (i.e., became a hermit).²²

By 365, when T'ao Yüan-ming was born, the Eastern Chin's political power had passed through four major power factions acting behind five puppet emperors. During T'ao's lifetime four more power factions behind five more puppet emperors continued to vie for political power, various cliques rising to supremacy at various times. Obviously T'ao lived in the midst of acute political chaos. It appears that T'ao's own official career spanned the years 395-405.²³ During this period a good deal of certainty can be placed on his service in four different positions under three or four different power factions.

²⁰ Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 575.

²¹ Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 557-558.

²² Davis, vol.I, 201-208.

²³ Any reference to exact dates involving T'ao Yüan-ming's life is based entirely upon the scholarship of A.R. Davis, whether it be his translations and interpretation of T'ao Yüan-ming's dated poems (i.e. containing a year and/or month of composition in the title) or his own conclusions based on a very thorough examination of apparently all extant materials surrounding the life of T'ao Yüan-ming. Davis himself exercises a healthy scholarly tentativeness at affixing any but the most sustainable exact dates. This is an important break from a long tradition that appears to have inferred far too much about T'ao Yüan-ming's life and chronology through the same limited sources: T'ao Yüan-ming's poems and, later, extrapolations from short accounts of T'ao Yüan-ming in dynastic histories. In the tradition of modern scholarship, Davis has set an important precedent by establishing the basic historical facts surrounding T'ao's life. The following references to T'ao's political career are summed up in volume I of Davis' work, pages 3-9.

His longest service appears to have been from 395-400 at Chien-k'ang (the southern capital, modern-day Nanking) under Ssu-ma Tao-tzu. Apparently Ssu-ma Tao-tzu arranged to have emperor Hsiao-wu murdered in 396. Afterward he placed the child emperor An (a puppet emperor from 397-419) on the throne and proceeded to take power himself. But during this period the military governor Huan Hsüan (369-404) already presented a growing challenge to Ssu-ma Tao-tzu and when T'ao Yüan-ming took his next post, in 401, Huan Hsüan was in control.²⁴

In his final rise to power, Huan Hsüan took advantage of a large, semi-popular revolt that began in 399, led by the "Taoist magician," pirate, and warlord Sun En (d. 402). Like other peasant uprisings during this period, the Sun En revolt partially reflected problems stemming from land consolidation among dominant gentry groups. Both peasants and lesser gentry participated in the Sun En revolt, inspired in part by *t'ien-shih tao*, a sect of religious Taoism.²⁵ Huan Hsüan continued to consolidate his military and political strength during this revolt, eventually seizing central authority. By 402, Liu Lao-chih (d.402) had subdued the revolt, but Huan Hsüan stepped into power, dethroning emperor An (for a brief period) in the process.

In August, 401 T'ao found himself leaving home to serve under the usurper Huan Hsüan. He traveled alone by night to Ch'ing-chou (part of Huan Hsüan's

²⁴ Davis, vol.I, 5; Zürcher, 113.

²⁵ Davis, vol.I, 6; Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, xxvi, 144-45.

domain), responsible to his mission, but quite loyal to his inner vision of a farmer's retired life, resolved to return home one day:

Mindful of my service, I have no leisure to sleep;
In the middle of the night I still travel solitary.
Shang songs are not my business;
My desire is to be a plough-mate.
I'll throw away my cap, return to my old village
And not be entangled in love of office.
I'll cultivate truth 'under a cross-beam door';
So may I make myself a name for goodness.
[From "Passing Through T'u-K'ou" (#33)]

T'ao never seemed to concern himself with *who* he must serve; rather, he focused on his basic reluctance to go out into the world at all. As in other poems dealing with public service, T'ao's heart clearly remained back at his rural home.

How T'ao Yüan-ming felt about serving Huan Hsüan remains unknown. Huan Hsüan's usurpation briefly challenged Confucian loyalty in the same way the Ssu-ma had in 249. Liu Yü (363-422) presented a similar challenge with his founding of the Liu Sung dynasty in 420, seven years before T'ao Yüan-ming died. In any case, it appears that T'ao's mother died in 401 and thereafter T'ao escaped whatever political straits he might have found himself in by withdrawing from society for the traditional Confucian three years' mourning. In the meantime, Liu Yi (d. 412) and Liu Yü ousted Huan Hsüan, restored emperor An, and set the stage for the rise of Liu Yü and the Liu Sung dynasty.

When T'ao Yüan-ming next entered governmental service, in early 405, it was under two of the generals who had defeated Huan Hsüan, one of the generals being Liu Yü himself. Again, the particular job awaiting T'ao remained unmentioned and irrelevant. Instead, T'ao focused on his mood and emotion. He took note of how the wind and rain, mountains and streams all follow Nature, but sadly, how he was opposing his own nature by going back into government

service. Again, his heart remained true to a profound inner vision of peace and seclusion, despite the necessities of daily life. He wrote, "Although this body seems under restraint / My original feelings cannot be changed / Garden and fields appear daily in my dreams / How can I long stay separated from them?"²⁶ Yet by late that same year T'ao had taken up a different position, his final post as Magistracy at P'eng-tse. T'ao's poem, "Return Home!," in which he outlined the circumstances and details surrounding the job, why he took it, how he felt occupying it, and how he came to resign have made the P'eng-tse Magistracy the most famous of T'ao's government positions.

T'ao Yüan-ming was about 34 years old when he accepted the P'eng-tse Magistracy. He and his family had grown quite poor despite their farming efforts and finally an uncle of T'ao's arranged for him to take this position. T'ao traveled to P'eng-tse but began to regret the move after only a few days. His feelings reflected more than homesickness. Leaving his family may have proved difficult in itself, but T'ao had also left his home, a refuge he had begun to rely upon quite heavily by this time. Additionally, as traditional history relates, T'ao faced paying obeisance to a visiting assistant governor, an act that threatened his personal spirit and integrity. He could not abide by bowing to anyone for a salary.²⁷ Still, worst of all, T'ao himself professed, the P'eng-tse Magistracy (or any official position, as it had come to be) was contrary to his nature.

²⁶ "When Passing Ch'ien-ch'i" (#36).

²⁷ Lai Ming, *A History of Chinese Literature*, (New York: Capricorn Books, 1964), 126; Davis, vol.II, 171.

As T'ao himself described in "Return Home!," he left his final post and arrived home to find peace and serenity. His children met him and held his hands. He had a cup of wine and simply strolled about his garden and courtyard, enjoying the trees, the clouds and mountains. Joyously, he had indeed returned home. At home with his family, garden, and wine T'ao might dream his dreams and write his poems without intrusion from the outside world. In contrast, he had felt completely alienated from himself during the P'eng-tse Magistracy. He said, "the spontaneity of my nature cannot be forced and coerced. Though hunger and cold are pressing, to go against myself makes me ill." T'ao had endured at P'eng-tse remarkably long considering these circumstances, resigning the post after about 80 days. His younger sister's death at Wu-ch'ang became his immediate explanation, but easily he had wished to leave from the outset.²⁸

"Return Home!" has come to epitomize something about T'ao's feeling for public service, the conflict it created within himself, and finally, how he resolved it by returning to his rural home. After the P'eng-tse Magistracy it seems that T'ao remained in retirement for the rest of his life. Yet retirement was not an easy task for him. Farming occupied a great deal of his time and this physical work alone sometimes exhausted and discouraged him. But more profound than the farmer's labor, T'ao had taken a step down from his rightful social position of scholar-official to occupy the second level in Chinese society.²⁹ Here an aspect of T'ao's personal burden arises. Both the Confucian and Taoist traditions

²⁸ Davis, vol.I, 191-194.

²⁹ Throughout Chinese history up to the early twentieth century, Chinese social hierarchy was arranged in five classes as follows: (1) scholar-officials (2) farmers (3) artisans (4) merchants (5) slaves (though slavery was never established in any formal or substantial sense during any period of Chinese history.)

justified retirement, but cultural tradition could not always sustain a daily reality of farming. T'ao highly and lengthily praised farming, using idealized and mythical sage-recluse precedents to bolster his own cause,³⁰ but becoming somewhat sarcastic of the more esteemed Confucian scholar in the process:³¹

[Confucius] loved the Way and moral power;
[Farmer] Fan Hsü he thought boorish.
[The Confucian scholar] Tung delighted in lute and books;
His fields and garden, he did not tread.
If they could, transcending,
Set their feet on such high paths.
Shall we dare not to adjust our lapels
In respectful praise of the excellence of their virtue.
[“To Encourage Farming” (#7), VI.]

The tradition of seclusion sometimes failed to sustain T'ao for other reasons as well. Ancestral duty sometimes pulled at his conscience, disrupting the serenity he sought from his solitary instincts, causing him to ponder the correctness of his personal decision. He especially felt such conflict when considering his family lineage. T'ao's recitation of a long ancestry (partly fictionalized), also reflected the importance of lineage in Chinese culture.³² The patrilineal family's continuity necessitated the birth of sons, and T'ao exhorted his eldest son³³ to honor the T'ao family:

It was divined as a lucky day;
It was told as a fortunate hour.
I named you Yen;
I styled you Ch'iu-ssu.
'Meek and reverent morning and evening',
'Mindful of this, you will abide in this'.
Think with esteem of K'ung Chi [Confucius' grandson] !

³⁰ “To Encourage Farming” (#7), I, II, IV.

³¹ J.R. Hightower, *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), page 31; Davis, vol.I, 26.

³² “Charge to My Son” (#8), I - VI. The pre-historic practice of “ancestor-worship,” originally dominated by superstition, soon evolved into a vital aspect of Chinese culture and social structure that remains quite alive to this day. Even Confucius reflected his cultural context when he emphasized respect for one's elders and performance of rites to one's ancestors. Today the Chinese still practice Tomb-Sweeping Day in direct continuity of ancestor worship.

³³ According to Davis' calculation. See Davis, vol.I, 29; vol.II, 24.

May you strive after him!
[“Charge to My Son” (#8), VII.]

Yet in praising, even idealizing his father and grandfather as gentlemen and scholar-officials, T’ao measured himself and fell short: “Alas for me with my little ability / ‘I gaze after them but do not come up to them / I regard with shame my white temples / With my shadow at my back I stand alone.”³⁴ He felt the Confucian filial son’s guilt at failing to honor his ancestors with public distinction of his own. Instead, he spent the last twenty-two years of his life in seclusion.

His final retirement years (405-427) saw the rise of Liu Yü and the Liu Sung dynasty. Liu Yü conducted northern military campaigns and even recaptured both the old Western Chin capitals in 418, but failed to sustain his accomplishments. Instead he returned to south China where he had emperor An murdered, replaced by emperor An’s brother (emperor Kung), who was also murdered, the throne then passing to Liu Yü himself. Thus the Eastern Chin ended in 420.³⁵ Little changed in the way of political stability. In-fighting continued in south China and some of emperor An’s former adherents, who had fled north and surrendered to the “barbarians” in power there, began instigating for reprisals.³⁶

In addition to Liu Yü’s military campaigns, T’ao Yüan-ming witnessed various other half-hearted attempts at recovering the north, but none of them achieved lasting significance. The political intrigue of the southern court

³⁴ “Charge to My Son” (#8), VII.

³⁵ Davis, vol.I, 115; Zürcher, 157-58.

³⁶ Eberhard, *A History of China*, 163.

remained everyone's preoccupation.³⁷ Northern "barbarians" also attempted to reunify China through military means, the most famous instance having been the Battle of Fei River conducted by the Tibetan warrior Fu Chien in 383 when T'ao was 18 years old.³⁸ All these military campaigns further exemplified China's overall disunity and, if anything, probably only reinforced T'ao's inclinations to withdraw from worldly affairs.

Here, briefly introduced, is T'ao Yüan-ming's geopolitical context plus a preliminary indication of the poet's own personal and social standing against such a background. No doubt this period induced much rejection of society and convention, but also spurred new intellectual and artistic growth. Despite violently shifting political alliances, south China became the center of highest medieval Asian culture.

³⁷ Eberhard, *A History of China*, 160, 161; Zürcher, 110.

³⁸ The Battle of Fei River has traditionally been viewed as a major battle, the determinant in dissolving Fu Chien's northern empire, the Former Ch'in (351-394), and thus a turning point in Chinese history from the Classical age to that of the Tartar-Buddhist. Quite recently, a thorough historiographical investigation by Michael C. Rogers has offered some interesting insights into this tradition. Rogers concludes that the battle itself, "generally appraised as the greatest single military threat with which a Chinese regime was confronted by the barbarian rulers of North China during the post-Han period of north-south division," has been greatly mythologized. Further, Rogers sees the battle not as *causing* the Former Ch'in's downfall but rather only an aspect of it. He does not dispute dividing Chinese history around this focal point, attributing it, however, to the Former Ch'in's downfall rather than the Fei River Battle itself. See Michael C. Rogers, *The Chronicle of Fu Chien: A Case of Exemplar History*, (Berkeley: University of California Pr., 1968), page 2 (quote), pages 1-110 (historiographical analysis).

Chapter 3 - Intellectual, Philosophical, and Religious Atmosphere

The profusion of names describing the intellectual and philosophical activity during the third and fourth centuries themselves testify to some of the era's confusion and complexity. Part of the reason for such confusion stems from an absence of the Western cultural distinctions between religion, philosophy, and political thought. For instance, Confucian morality certainly applied to both society and politics, and both society and politics were rooted in kinship morality. Social order stemmed from family structure and political hierarchy was an expanded version of family hierarchy. But as amalgamated as these concepts were, they became even more intermixed with the onset of the Period of Disunity.

As the later Han collapsed amidst peasant uprisings, "barbarian" invasions, and internal rivalries, political thought, philosophy, and religion all underwent dynamic change. Confucianism suffered considerable discredit, both from an internal degeneracy among Confucian officials and from an overall association

of Confucian ritual and bureaucracy with the fallen Han empire.¹ Confucianism itself never disappeared, of course, but the violent and unstable political reality that followed the Han certainly did not resemble anything approaching the ideal Confucian society. Confucianism, at worst, became the manipulative tool of usurpers who demanded political service from officials still loyal to their former dynasty. With so many shifts in power from one emperor to another (not to mention the predominance of puppet emperors), Confucian loyalty became rather difficult to maintain, and some of the more idealistic perished at the hands of new leaders. Thus Confucianism deteriorated in something of a vicious cycle, internally corrupt and externally exploited, until many intellectuals could no longer respect it as a viable political philosophy. Still, scholar-officials remained familiar with the Confucian texts. T'ao Yüan-ming was obviously well-educated in the Confucian Classics and sometimes expressed his wistfulness for the lost Confucian age.

T'ao revealed his Confucian side when thinking of his sons. Despite his own decision to withdraw from the social and political world, he probably did not want his sons to grow up as mere farmers.² He referred to the Confucian Analects specifically when criticizing his son A-hsüan, writing "A-hsüan nears 'setting the

¹ Kung-chuan Hsiao, (F.W. Mote, trans.), *History of Chinese Political Thought*, vol.I, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 603, 604; Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 314; Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), 57-58.

² Hightower, *Poems*, 164.

will on study³ / Yet loves not literature or learning."⁴ It would seem that T'ao still respected basic Confucian education, regardless of his personal circumstances in relation to Confucian political service. T'ao also revealed a personal regard for Confucianism when addressing his relative, the Duke of Ch'ang-sha. T'ao pointed out that though both he and the Duke descended from T'ao K'an, a famous official during the early Chin, only the Duke had honored their family tradition by continuing an active political life. But despite T'ao's personal preference for seclusion, he admired the Duke, showing reverence for both him and Confucianism:

Oh, admirable is my excellent kinsman;
 He truly has 'roofed this hall'.
 His harmonious spirit is sunshine in winter;
 His shining ideals are a jade sceptre.
 He has gathered the spring flowers,
 He has been careful of the autumn frost.
 I say: Be reverent!
 Truly he is the light of our clan.
 ["To My Grandfather's Cousin the Duke of Ch'ang-sha" (#4), II.]

Not only did T'ao admire the Duke and his honoring of the T'ao family tradition, but tried to see his own endeavors in relative humility, viewing them from a Confucian perspective: "'Although the basket employed is small, / Going on to the end, one makes a mound.'"⁵

On a somewhat different note, T'ao addressed Chou Hsü-chih (377-423), a former renowned Confucian scholar, remembering the latter's Confucian accomplishment. Chou Hsü-chih had relinquished his Confucian training by

³ From *Analects*, chapter 2, section 4 in which Confucius says: "At fifteen I had made up my mind to devote myself to serious studies." See Hung-ming Ku, trans., *English Translation of the Analects* (revised edition), (Taipei: Shih Sheng Daily News, 1984), 4-5; Davis, vol.I, 112.

⁴ "Reproving My Sons" (#45).

⁵ "To My Grandfather's Cousin the Duke of Ch'ang-sha" (#4), IV. Here emphasizing the worth of effort, from *Analects*, chapter 9, section 18. See Ku, 44; Davis, vol.I, 19.

joining a Buddhist monastery in 402, and T'ao seems to have held mixed feelings for this conversion,⁶ perhaps wishing Chou would return to Confucian scholarship. He wrote,

Master Chou sets out the teaching of Confucius;
Tsu and Hsieh 'come like an echo'.
The Way has been lost nearly a thousand years,
But this morning is heard here once again.
Horse-lines are not a place for teaching;
Your collation of books is also laborious.
This old man has ones dear to him,
And thinks of becoming your neighbour.
I want you to give instruction to my sons,
And accompany me to the bank of the Ying river.
[From "To Secretary Chou, Tsu and Hsieh" (#14).]

And of course, at times, T'ao mourned for a "lost Confucian age," one that never really existed in history - after all, Confucius himself lived during the Warring States period - but one he envisioned as part of his own personal idealism. He lamented, "Concerned was [Confucius] / To mend his age and make it pure / Although [a sage-king] did not come / The *Rites* and *Music* a while were renewed," only to be followed by Ch'in Shih Huang's book-burning and subsequent loss of the Confucian age.⁷ While such sadness reflected something about T'ao Yüan-ming's own personal disposition toward Confucianism, it may also be understood in terms of T'ao's harsh political reality.

The decline of Confucianism and a Confucian social and political order contributed directly to the rise of "Neo-Taoism."⁸ Neo-Taoism, on at least some level, mixed Confucianism and philosophical Taoism, but also gained an important new metaphysical element. In terms of philosophy, such syncretism

⁶ Davis, Vol.I, 55; Hightower, *Poems*, 60.

⁷ From "Drinking Wine" (#42), XX.

⁸ Also known as Dark Learning or Mysterious Learning (*hsüan hsueh*), the Mystic School, or Lao-Chuang thought.

was by no means unprecedented, for even "Han Confucianism," a product of the Han Synthesis, was intermixed with Legalism and Naturalism. Neo-Taoism, in political terms, represented the frustrated attempt among disillusioned scholars-officials to reconcile personal integrity and survival with a very dangerous and unpredictable political reality. Thus the third and fourth centuries witnessed an attempt to mix a Taoist conception of the sage-recluse who remained removed from worldly ways with a prevalent Confucian need to participate in public service. In this constraint, the Neo-Taoists made much of Chuang Tzu's idea that truly enlightened men need not withdraw physically from the world in order to escape its trappings. In fact, such a man might, by virtue of his superior wisdom and demeanor, significantly influence society and politics without any overt, "purposive" action.⁹

Neo-Taoism's origins may be traced to the immediate post-Han era with the writings of Wang Pi (226-249). Wang Pi is perhaps most famous for his thoughts concerning the Taoist ideal of "non-being." This subject frequently occupied Lao Tzu's literature, yet Wang Pi felt this reflected Lao Tzu's failure to achieve such an ideal. "Non-being" could not be taught. Confucius, on the other hand, *refused* to talk about "non-being," therefore he had actually *achieved* what Lao-Tzu could only conceptualize.¹⁰ But though Wang Pi felt Confucius to be the greatest of all

⁹ Burton Watson, *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 6; Yu-lan Feng, (E.R. Hughes, trans.), *Spirit of Chinese Philosophy*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970), 154-155; Zürcher, 87-88; Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, xx; Hsiao, 607.

¹⁰ Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 96.

sages, he interpreted Confucius in very Taoist terms. His very definition of "sage" was Taoist,¹¹ and thus Wang Pi's thought epitomized Neo-Taoism.

Even Ko Hung (ca.277 - ca.357), one of the most conservative Confucianists of the age, reflected such syncretism. He attacked the more extreme Neo-Taoists as immoral hedonists, their anarchy as politically impractical. But though he continued to focus on Confucianism as the most viable political philosophy, even Ko Hung incorporated Taoist conceptions of natural simplicity and original purity.¹² And then Fan Hsüan (fl. ca.376-396), reputed to be a strictly traditional Confucianist who resisted Neo-Taoism altogether, nevertheless lived in seclusion and refused to participate in politics.¹³ Even if he successfully rejected Neo-Taoism philosophically, he still reacted somewhat similarly politically. Therefore, in addition to an outdated Han Confucianism, a vivid political reality lay behind the Neo-Taoist movement.

In 249 A.D., twenty-nine years after the Han's final downfall, the Ssu-ma family initiated a coup in one of the Three Kingdoms, the Wei. This shift in power eventually led to the establishment of the Western Chin in 265, but for the time being instigated one of the Period of Disunity's first major political conflicts. Neo-Taoist philosophers like Wang Pi and Ho Yen (ca.190-249) died for their affiliation with the Ts'ao family, the founders of the Wei kingdom.¹⁴ The Ssu-ma ruthlessly exterminated many other Wei loyalists and thus the dilemma arose

¹¹ Yu-lan Feng, *The History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol.II, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953-1954), pages 169, 173, 175; Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 593.

¹² Hsiao, 651-656.

¹³ Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 337-338, 518.

¹⁴ Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 524, 593.

between maintaining a Confucian loyalty to the Wei Kingdom or betraying it by switching over to the Ssu-ma clique. The Ssu-ma interpreted retirement as treason, manipulating Confucianism for their own purposes, insisting that Confucianism made political service in general (and to them specifically) an obligation.

Such circumstances contributed to a distinction between *ming-chiao* ("Doctrine of Names" or "morals and institutions") and *tzu-jan* ("spontaneity," or naturalness"), with proponents of the former tending to support the Ssu-ma clique, followers of the latter still loyal to the Wei.¹⁵ This division surpassed mere politics to represent a philosophical and social break between conformists and non-conformists. Many disillusioned intellectuals began to express a general non-conformity through *tzu-jan*. The legendary "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove"¹⁶ came to epitomize such non-conformist behavior. The Seven Sages were all scholar-officials who became caught between the shifting political factions of the Wei kingdom and the Ssu-ma usurpers. Like many others, they felt loyal to the Wei Kingdom in a Confucian sense. In such straits, scholar-officials might survive by betraying their personal integrity and switching their loyalty, perish by remaining idealistically loyal to their former regime, or attempt "passive resistance" through bizarre behavior.¹⁷ Thus the Seven Sages rationalized an outer display of *ming-chiao*, paying lip service to the Western Chin, while maintaining

¹⁵ Holzman, 81.

¹⁶ The most famous being Hsi K'ang (223-262) and Juan Chi (210-263); also Hsiang Hsiu (ca.221-ca.300), Shan T'ao (205-283), Wang Jung (234-305), Juan Hsien (234-305), and Liu Ling (d. after 265).

¹⁷ Holzman, 243.

a personal, truer practice of *tzu-jan*. From another aspect *tzu jan* meant "a natural use of one's emotions without the constraint of outworn social taboos."¹⁸ Thus the Seven Sages' nonconformity reflected an intolerable political situation as well as a social and philosophical reassessment.

In reality, three of the Seven Sages eventually rejected their non-conformity and ended up serving the Ssu-ma clique,¹⁹ but the other four helped create a legendary reputation for all seven by violating Confucian mourning propriety, drinking excessively, displaying nudity, and engaging in metaphysical, abstract conversation, known as *ch'ing t'an* ("pure talk" or "pure conversation").²⁰ Originally, during the Wei, scholar-officials had used *ch'ing t'an* as a means of political commentary in which the relative virtues or demerits of particular officials might be praised or decried. Wang Pi, as one of the more renowned *ch'ing t'an* conversationalists, helped contribute to a "golden era" or *ch'ing t'an* between 240-249.²¹ The Ssu-ma coup in 249 caused a marked shift in the nature of *ch'ing t'an*, for obviously political commentary had suddenly become quite dangerous. Criticizing the wrong official might cost the critic his life. Thus *ch'ing t'an* became increasingly abstract, mirroring the response of scholar-officials to their political reality.²²

¹⁸ Holzman, 190.

¹⁹ Hsiang Hsiu, Shan T'ao, and Wang Jung. See Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 525, 563, 589.

²⁰ William Theodore de Bary, ed., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 247; Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, xxiii-xxiv, xvii, xix, xx; 128-129, 180, 309, 311, 372-375, 392, 393; Holzman, 59.

²¹ Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 11, 95-96.

²² Such dialogue also came to encompass the discussion of "name-principles," that is, "making a logical analysis of principles through a differentiation of terms, without regard for actual facts." See Hsiao, 175, 176 (quote); Mather, xxii, xxiii-xxiv; Feng, *Spirit of Chinese Philosophy*, 130, 131.

To a certain extent, the scholar-officials' response to their political reality may be understood in terms of Juan Chi, one of the most famous of the Seven Sages. Though Juan Chi did not actively participate, he was nevertheless preoccupied with politics, and resorted to satire and innuendo to criticize the Ssu-ma clique.²³ Yet in this sense he leaned more toward Confucianism than Taoism, typifying the Neo-Taoist mixture. And though he attacked Confucianism, he certainly did not attack the Confucian philosophy *per se*, but rather what Confucianism had come to be in the third century; hypocritical, hollow ritual. Thus his filial piety became legendary despite his outrageous violation of Confucian mourning ritual upon his mother's death.²⁴ But Juan Chi also revealed a metaphysical yearning beyond Confucianism altogether; a yearning that would culminate for the rest of Chinese culture during the fourth century and afterwards with the rise of Buddhism. In this sense "Juan Chi [was] a forerunner of a new kind of hermit, a religious recluse."²⁵

By the time of T'ao Yüan-ming's lifetime, the Seven Sages had become legendary. Reacting to a continuing disunified and dangerous world, Eastern Chin scholar-officials idealized the Seven Sages as representing spiritual transcendence and freedom in the midst of political intrigue.²⁶ Incidentally, T'ao Yüan-ming's contemporary, the great landscape painter Ku K'ai-chih, seems to have survived an active social life around the imperial court by passing himself

²³ Holzman, 2, 7, 18, 34.

²⁴ Holzman, 111, 134, 136, 190, 206, 244.

²⁵ Holzman, 25 (quote), 185, 187, 191, 192, 245.

²⁶ Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 371, 376; Holzman, 81.

off as a "genius, painter, and a fool," continuing something of a tradition begun by the Seven Sages.²⁷ But it becomes rather difficult to call T'ao Yüan-ming a "Neo-Taoist."²⁸

Only one of T'ao's poems, "Body, Shadow and Soul," lends itself to a truly "philosophical" classification and, for all that, stands out as much as an anomaly as anything else.²⁹ In this poem T'ao arranges a three-part dialogue between representatives of (1) this transient, bodily existence, (2) that existence's worldly appearance, and finally (3) the human spirit capable of transcending the shortcomings and delusions of the first two.³⁰ Clearly this one work might be called philosophical, but T'ao was by no means a philosopher.³¹ T'ao worked very much in the realm of philosophical Taoism, but in the closest analysis Taoism approaches "mysticism" more than "philosophy." To use Lao Tzu's own words, Taoism is a "philosophy without words,"³² a practice without discourse. T'ao

²⁷ Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-Yü*, 542; Shih-Hsiang Chen, trans., *Biography of Ku K'ai-chih*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), 5-8, 17.

²⁸ The most notable attempt to do so has been Ch'en Yin-k'o's article, "*T'ao Yüan-ming chih ssu-hsiang yu ch'ing-t'an chih kuan-hsi*," ("The Relation of T'ao Yüan-ming's Thought to Pure Talk"), (Peking: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1945). Ch'en argues a connection between T'ao Yüan-ming and the *ch'ing t'an* tradition, seeing T'ao as a great thinker as well as a great poet.

²⁹ Davis also includes "Drinking Alone During Continuous Rains" (#20) as a "philosophical poem." See Davis, vol.I, 62-63.

³⁰ Davis, vol.I, 36.

³¹ On the basis of "Body, Shadow and Soul" Davis makes a strong point for qualifying T'ao as an artist and thus "Body, Shadow and Soul" as the creative product of an *artist*, not a philosopher. Davis mentions, "I think that it is wrong to regard [this poem] too much as a document in contemporary intellectual controversy." (Davis, vol.I, 36).

³² *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 2.

Yüan-ming reflected an appreciation of these concepts. For instance, his depiction of farming life profoundly captured a feeling for Taoist simplicity:³³

In the country I take little part in men's affairs;
In the narrow lane wheels and harness are rare.
The bright sun is shut out by my rustic gate;
The empty house cuts off [worldly] preoccupations.
At times again in the waste ground and byways,
Parting the grasses, I share men's comings and goings.
When we meet, there is no discursive talk;
We speak of the growth of mulberry and hemp.
[From "Returning the Live in the Country" (#12), II.]

To carry on discourse would not only compromise the poetic effect, but would also indicate a less profound appreciation of Taoism. After all, the *Tao Te Ching* itself approaches poetry; very mystical, intuitive poetry, but poetry nonetheless. Some of T'ao Yüan-ming's work clearly reflects this mystical Taoist tradition in Chinese culture, but hardly part of the *ch'ing t'an* Neo-Taoist philosophical tradition.

The greater Neo-Taoist cultural context remains important for understanding T'ao Yüan-ming, but any interest or involvement T'ao might have entertained for Neo-Taoist intellectual circles or *ch'ing t'an* conversations is certainly absent from his surviving poems. It seems difficult to associate T'ao with other aspects of Neo-Taoism as well and, again, the absence of association here seems to speak quite loudly for the kind of person T'ao was in relation to his social context. A major division among Neo-Taoists may be made between advocates of "no action" and "no ruler."³⁴ "No action" advocates attempted to reconcile Confucian public service and Taoist "action through non-action." "No

³³ See, for instance, the *Tao Te Ching*, chapters, 28, 56, 63, and 80. In the *Chuang Tzu*, see the last part of chapter seven, translated in Burton Watson, *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, 94-95.

³⁴ Hsiao, 606.

ruler" advocates were anarchists. "No-ruler" advocacy may be traced from Juan Chi (of Seven Sages fame) through Pao Ching-yen (fl. early fourth century) to none other than T'ao Yüan-ming, based on his essay "Peach Blossom Source."³⁵

In this essay, one of the most famous works in Chinese literature, T'ao embarks on an idyllic fantasy in which a fisherman journeys to a utopian land safely removed from the troubles of the world. The Peach Blossom Source's inhabitants are descendent from political refugees, so to speak, who fled the violent Ch'in Shih Huang era. They have known only peace and prosperity ever since. This land astounds the fisherman. Here is a place where "there were fine fields and beautiful pools, clumps of mulberries and bamboos where cocks crowed and dogs barked at each other," calling up traditional Chinese images of serenity. The utopian people are as ignorant of the great Han dynasty as they are of the disunity following, yet they sigh at *all* the news the fisherman has to tell them. They are happy to be removed from the entirety and are careful to tell the fisherman not to divulge their secret world upon his return to the outside.³⁶

Given T'ao's political milieu, creating such a fantasy seems entirely understandable. Yet, similar to T'ao's poems inspired by reading the *Shan Hai Ching*, it should be seen as just that, a fantasy. Trying to read into it something more specific than just a general distaste for worldly society becomes wholly speculative at best.³⁷ And classifying T'ao with the Neo-Taoist "no-ruler"

³⁵ See Hsiao, 619, 620, 626. Again, this is reading too much into a single work of T'ao's, in magnitude as well as in meaning. Even Hsiao admits T'ao Yüan-ming's "outlines of his rulerless ideal society are merely hinted at in [the 'Peach Blossom Source'] and in his other poetry." (page 620). Thus even Hsiao's association of T'ao Yüan-ming with the "no ruler" faction of Neo-Taoism becomes tenuous at best.

³⁶ Davis, vol.I, 195-201.

³⁷ Nevertheless, this follows a long Chinese tradition, begun primarily during the Sung dynasty (960-1279)

advocates actually begins to distort T'ao the artist by casting him as a political anarchist, a position none of his own work supports. T'ao's withdrawal from politics seems to have been strongly individualistic, based on personal reasons, not particularly political ones. Even his Confucian yearnings, as illustrated above, seem to have been more emotional than political. It is important to recognize T'ao Yüan-ming in relation to the Neo-Taoist context, but a mistake to infer too much.

The metaphysical aspect of Neo-Taoism gained greater momentum and expanded to wider proportions than ever before in Chinese culture. Such activity, initially utilizing strictly Chinese philosophical ingredients - primarily Confucianism and Taoism - directly contributed to an unprecedented development of a foreign religion: Buddhism. Initially filtering through China, Buddhism changed Asian culture ever afterward. Buddhist monks extensively borrowed *ch'ing t'an* metaphysical terminology to translate scriptures, adding new vitality to *ch'ing t'an* as well as spreading Buddhism among the Neo-Taoist gentry.³⁸ Underlying the use of common terminology, Buddhists and Neo-Taoists discovered common concepts, such as "being" versus "non-being," "mutability" versus "immutability," and "action" versus "non-action." Thus Buddhism's rise and development became, in part, the story of its mesh with Neo-Taoism. Such

in which Chinese historians and literary critics came to interpret T'ao Yüan-ming's work in terms of veiled political commentary. They viewed the "Peach Blossom Source" in particular as T'ao's response to the dynastic turnover in 420, from the Eastern Chin to the Liu Sung. T'ao's aversion to the Liu Sung would have been, of course, the correct Confucian response. See Davis, vol.I, xv; Davis, vol.II, 140-143. Reiterating these thoughts in more general terms, Burton Watson wrote, "the fondness of Confucian scholars for poetry of didactic and political import at times led them to discover political meaning in places where it was almost certainly never intended." See Watson, *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, 5.

³⁸ Ch'en, *Buddhism*, 63; Zürcher, 95; Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, xxv.

an interaction also helped develop the philosophical aspect of Buddhism, a unique Chinese contribution to the history of Buddhism.³⁹

Gentry Buddhism drew its adherents from the literati, some well-versed in the Confucian texts, others former adherents of Neo-Taoism, and of course, some who had been involved with both Taoist and Confucian philosophies. Hui-yüan (334-416), one of the most famous Chinese Buddhists, was one such scholar. He began as a Confucianist, gained an interest in philosophical Taoism, then eventually became a Buddhist monk.⁴⁰ He founded his famous White Lotus Society⁴¹ in 402 and established the Tung-lin monastery near T'ao Yüan-ming's home on the northwestern face of Mt. Lu.⁴² Typical of Buddhist monasteries arising all over south China, Hui-yüan's became a refuge for scholar-officials escaping the Eastern Chin and Liu Sung's perilous political worlds.⁴³ In addition to religion and philosophy, Buddhism profoundly embellished Chinese culture in such fields as painting, sculpture, architecture, and poetry. While Buddhist monks and clergy met Chinese gentry on this common cultural ground, the gentry, in turn, began sponsoring many Buddhist activities, such as building monasteries, financing translations of Buddhist texts, and even feeding adherents

³⁹ Ch'en, *Buddhism*, 62, 63-64; Chang, *Creativity and Taoism*, 44; Feng, *History of Philosophy*, 240-241; Feng, *Spirit of Philosophy*, 146-147; Zürcher, 73.

⁴⁰ Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), 46.

⁴¹ The White Lotus Society became one of the most important organizations responsible for spreading Buddhism in China. By promising that any and all people (not just the elite educated in Buddhist scriptures) could be reborn in the pure land of Amitaba Buddha, the White Lotus Society helped make Buddhism accessible to the masses, and thus greatly encouraged the popular Buddhist tradition in southern China. As founder and leader of the White Lotus Society, Hui Yüan came to be recognized, along with the great translator of Buddhist scriptures, Kumarajiva (350-413), as one of the two most important Buddhist monks in the Chinese Buddhist tradition.

⁴² Davis, Vol.I, 65; 94, note 41.

⁴³ Zürcher, 216, 217.

of this new religion.⁴⁴ Much intermingling of Buddhists and official society took place.

Buddhism's appeal for the Chinese gentry became manifold. Monasteries, in addition to attracting the general run of scholar-officials to its sanctuary, also provided fresh opportunities for lower class gentry who found little room for scholarly or creative development in the clique-dominated official court. Still others sought to avoid taxes or to seek shelter, food, and clothing. But perhaps most interesting in terms of philosophy and the reclusive ideal, withdrawing to Buddhist monasteries also became endowed with the Chinese cultural esteem reserved for noble, idealistic retirees seeking spiritual perfection.⁴⁵ Thus the religious recluse, as anticipated by Juan Chi, became a prominent feature of the Chinese sage-recluse tradition.

Prince Hsiao T'ung (501-531) called T'ao Yüan-ming and two members of the White Lotus Society, Liu Ch'ai-sang (d. ca. 413) and Chou Hsü-chih,⁴⁶ as the "Three Recluses of Hsün-yang."⁴⁷ The poems T'ao wrote these two men and the fact that they were both former officials intimately reflects the appeal Buddhism had gained. But though Neo-Taoists, Buddhists and T'ao Yüan-ming all reacted to a common political situation, T'ao's reaction remained singular. In fact, the most far-reaching inference relating T'ao Yüan-ming to Neo-Taoism or

⁴⁴ Zürcher, 75.

⁴⁵ Zürcher, 74; Sun, 175; Frodsham, 45.

⁴⁶ Mentioned earlier in regard to T'ao's poem "To Secretary Chou, Tsu and Hsieh."

⁴⁷ Davis, vol.II, 173.

Buddhism lies in the absence of any substantial connection. T'ao's withdrawal was quite different from the other two "recluses of Hsün-yang."

To begin, T'ao Yüan-ming withdrew from society and politics as an individual and remained so. The White Lotus Society became another social community, complete with political aspects. As Buddhism spread, political involvement with the imperial court developed. In 381 emperor Hsiao-wu became a Buddhist and the remainder of the Eastern Chin saw greater Buddhist political participation.⁴⁸ Even the White Lotus Society, rural sanctuary that it was, could not exempt itself from the political world altogether. During Huan Hsüan's rise to power, which took place in the vicinity of Hui-yüan's monastery, Hui-yüan had to deal with Huan Hsüan and his generals. After Huan Hsüan gained power, controversy developed over Buddhists' rights and obligations and Hui-yüan found himself defending Buddhist monks' otherworldly allegiance, exempting them from obeisance to civil authority, including the emperor himself. His argument survives today in his famous essay, "A Monk Does Not Bow Before a King."⁴⁹

T'ao Yüan-ming, as an individual recluse, appears to have experienced no such conflicts. He withdrew from society as a single scholar-turned-farmer and by such action probably posed no challenge to authority. Writing to the Hsün-yang recluse Liu Ch'ai-sang, T'ao seemed to reflect only comradeship and mutual convictions. Buddhism played no role as T'ao focused on seclusion:

By hills and valleys long was I called;

⁴⁸ Zürcher, 158-159.

⁴⁹ Zürcher, 212, 214; deBary, 280.

What matter then made me hesitate?
Only because of my relatives and friends,
I never dared speak of a solitary life.
On a lucky day a rare thought came to me;
I took my staff and returned to my hut in the west.
[From "Answering a Poem by Liu Ch'ai-sang" (#22).]

and,

Living in poverty, I have little human contact,
And at times forget the four seasons' circling.
In my courtyard there are many fallen leaves;
Moved by these, I know it is already autumn.
New sunflowers grow thick by the northern window;
Fine ripe grain has been raised in my southern fields.
If at the present time I am not happy,
How do I know there will be another year?
I call my wife and take the children by the hand;
This fair day we'll start on a 'distant wandering'.
["In Return for a Poem by Liu Ch'ai-sang" (#23)]

T'ao Yüan-ming's singularity as both a poet and a recluse begin to emerge. Unlike his contemporary Hsieh Ling-yün, his poetry reflected no Buddhist philosophical or religious influence. T'ao's poetic style also remained unique, unencumbered by the more predominant mannered court poetry or metaphysical Neo-Taoist poetry of his era. His seclusion was apolitical and nonreligious, his poetic expression independent.

Chapter 4 - Literary and Creative Context

The aristocracy that developed for centuries in north China flocked south *en masse* during the early fourth century, resulting in a concentration of Chinese culture below the Yangtze. In fact, during the centuries that followed, southern Chinese developed a certain amount of cultural arrogance based on the fact that the north had been overrun by "barbarians," corrupting the "pure" Chinese culture still unblemished in the south. In any case, southern China did experience significant cultural developments. T'ao Yüan-ming made a singular contribution to poetry, and important activity took place in other fields as well. Landscape painting arose for the first time, contributing to the rise of Chinese painting as a fine art during this period. Ku K'ai-chih became China's first great landscape painter, and Wang Hsi-chih (303/321-379) achieved an excellence in calligraphy¹

¹ Unlike Western calligraphy, which remains more of a craft, Chinese calligraphy has always been considered a fine art. The roots of this distinction lie in the visual aspects of alphabetical and ideographic languages. While Chinese "characters" developed continuously from actual pictures, Western languages adopted alphabets. Thus, as a natural extension, Chinese calligraphy lent itself to individual and even abstract visual expression while Western calligraphy developed toward uniform "hands" - that is, differently styled alphabets, such as Gothic or Black Letter.

that remains a standard to this day.² All this creative development took place within a greater aesthetic context greatly affected by Buddhism. Buddhism not only influenced specific creative endeavors, but Buddhist monasteries, along with the imperial court, became one of the two main financial sponsors of creative activity during this period.³ But while Buddhism greatly affected some poets, particularly T'ao Yüan-ming's contemporary Hsieh Ling-yün, T'ao Yüan-ming himself remained aloof from this foreign religion, never participating in its artistic community nor reflecting Buddhist influence in his poetry.

Besides poetry influenced by Buddhism, two other main poetic trends dominated T'ao Yüan-ming's era. In a sense, these two trends stemmed from the non-conformist / conformist, *tzu-jan* / *ming-chiao* dichotomy outlined earlier.⁴ *Hsüan-yen*, or Neo-Taoist poetry, arose along with *ch'ing t'an* as a vehicle for abstract philosophical discourse. Such poetry focused on metaphysical exegesis rather than expression of personal emotion.⁵ For instance, Sun Ch'o (320-377) wrote poetry such as the following:

Looking up, I view the vastness of creation,
Looking down, I survey the existence of living things.
Contingencies come and go, disasters arise,
The good and the bad displace one another.
Man's wisdom is clouded by greed,
His understanding cramped by feelings.
In the wilds, he suffers from withering cold,
At court, he meets with sultry heat.
Failure would strike him with sudden terror,
Success would make him unable to contain himself for joy.
[Kang-i Sun Chang, trans., *Six Dynasties Poetry*, 5-6.]

² Rodzinski, 84; Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, 586.

³ Rodzinski, 81; Gernet, 230.

⁴ Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, xviii-xix.

⁵ Chang, *Six Dynasties Poetry*, 5, 9.

Such a poem does little more than reflect philosophical principles, especially the Taoist view of relativity found throughout the *Tao Te Ching*. Other, more direct Taoist allusions may be found. For instance, lines seven and eight reflect influence from the *Tao Te Ching*, chapter forty-five: "Agitation triumphs over the cold / Stillness triumphs over the heated / Clarity and stillness bring order to the world."⁶ Or, the last two lines clearly echo the *Tao Te Ching*, chapter thirteen: "There is alarm in both favor and disgrace."⁷ But, similar to the *Tao Te Ching*, such a poem offers little insight into the composer's humanity. Poetry developing around the imperial court was no less abstract and bereft of emotion. This verse was highly artificial and mannered, elaborately constructed around esoteric literary allusions, and intelligible only to the gentry themselves.⁸ In a sense these poets may have been reacting against *hsüan-yen* poetry,⁹ but in doing so they accomplished no more in the way of personal expression. T'ao Yüan-ming stood dramatically apart from either of these trends, using simple language and filling his poetry with much of his own humanity.¹⁰ For instance, even one of his more "philosophical" poems reflects his personal expression:

The cycle of life inevitable comes to its end:
 In remotest antiquity men spoke of it so.
 [The "immortals"] Sung and Ch'iao were once in the world,
 But now where are they to be seen?
 But an old man presented me with wine,
 And said: Drink and become an immortal!
 I try a draught and all feelings are remote;
 A second cup and immediately I forget Heaven,

⁶ R.L. Wing, trans.

⁷ R.L. Wing, trans.

⁸ Eberhard, 158, 166; Frodsham, 9; Watson, *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, 147.

⁹ Chang, *Six Dynasties Poetry*, 13.

¹⁰ Watson, *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, 124.

Heaven surely is not removed from here;
If one trusts in the True, one does not take first place.
My cloud-soaring crane has marvellous wings;
It returns from the Eight Limits in an instant.
Since I embraced this solitariness,
I have struggled for forty years.
My bodily frame has long since been transformed;
But if my heart is constant, what more is there to say?
[“Drinking Alone During Continuous Rains” (#20).]

T’ao’s philosophical outlook remained, for the most part, indelibly linked to his personal emotion. The prevalence of the poet’s own thoughts and feelings are what make T’ao Yüan-ming’s work so accessible these many centuries later. T’ao was among the first Chinese poets to express himself this personally, using the “five-word” *shih* style in a new, dynamic way.

As a poetic form, the five-word *shih* goes at least as far back as the early Han dynasty, representing an important break from the less-expressive “four-word” *shih* of the *Book of Odes*.¹¹ The *Book of Odes*’ four-word *shih*, many of which were derived from popular folk songs, tend to limit their expression to everyday affairs of the common people. For example:

Peach tree young and fresh,
bright bright its blossoms:
this girl’s getting married,
she’ll do well in her home.

Peach tree young and fresh,
plump are its fruits:
this girl’s getting married,
she’ll do well in her rooms.

Peach tree young and fresh,
its leaves lush and full:
this girl’s getting married,
she’ll do right by her people.

[Poem #6, *Book of Odes*, Watson, trans., *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, 19.]

Or,

¹¹ One of the Confucian Classics and Chinese culture’s earliest collection of poems, many of which were originally meant to be sung. The *Book of Odes* consists of over three hundred poems compiled somewhere between 1100 B.C. and 570 B.C. See Lai, 27-28; Schwartz, 87; Watson, *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, 15.

Rich is the year with much millet and rice,
and we have tall granaries
with hundreds and thousands and millions of sheaves.
We make wine and sweet spirits
to offer to ancestor and ancestress,
thus to fulfill the hundred rites
and bring down blessings in abundance.

[Poem #279, *Book of Odes*, Watson, trans., *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, 43.]

Though by no means eclipsing four-word *shih*, five-word *shih* gained popularity and continued to develop throughout the Han and especially during the Three Kingdoms period under the influence of Ts'ao Chih (192-232). In a sense, T'ao Yüan-ming made the next great step in five-word *shih*, composing, perhaps, the greatest poetry in that genre to date. However, T'ao also composed a number of works¹² in the old four-word *shih* style.¹³

In addition to the *shih* verse, much early Chinese poetry was composed in the *fu* style. Flamboyance and elaborate description characterized this highly popular genre as far back as the Han dynasty when writers focused on particular subjects, such as imperial hunts or festivals. Some subjects became traditional "*fu* subjects" on which subsequent writers seemed to attempt to out-finesse earlier models.¹⁴ These poems rarely, if ever, expressed the writer's personal feelings¹⁵ and focused instead on lavish description. For instance, in describing the Chinese flood myth, Mu Hua (fl. 300 A.D.) wrote:

a watery wasteland, tossing, heaving,
the sky afloat on it, no coast in sight;
fathomless, limitless,
bottomless, unending,
with waves like chains of mountains,

¹² Poems #1 - #9.

¹³ Lai, 114, 118, 121; Davis, vol.I, 11-12, 33-34.

¹⁴ J.R. Hightower, "The Fu of T'ao Ch'ien," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* vol. 27, (1954): 189-190.

¹⁵ Gernet, 99-100, 168; Lai, 98, 99-100, 105; Watson, *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*.

now linking, now shattering,
sucking in and spewing back the hundred rivers,
washing clear the Huai and the Han [rivers],
inundating the broad embankments,
immense and borderless, trackless and wild.

And,

jostling, stumbling, piling up in heaps,
suddenly bulging into knolls and declivities,
whirling, sucking down to form hollows,
now shooting skyward in lonely pinnacles.
Schools of little waves dart off at an angle,
while hulking giants rear and crash together;
waves in panic flee with lightning quickness,
frightened waters huddle close together,
parting, closing, breaking, joining
ceaselessly, restlessly,
troubled and turbulent,
hissing with spume.

[From "Rhyme-Prose on the Sea," Watson, trans., *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, 152.]

T'ao himself wrote only three such *fu*¹⁶ that survive. And though these poems offer nothing of the emotion T'ao's other works contain, each may nevertheless reveal something different about the poet.

At the most basic level, T'ao seemed able to follow the *fu* tradition as well as anyone and even improve upon it as he did in "Quieting the Affections." "Judged merely in terms of imaginative skill, T'ao Yüan-ming achieved a triumph here; he certainly wrote the most brilliant poem on this particular theme."¹⁷ T'ao's description was certainly quite captivating:

She lifts the red curtain and seats herself correctly;
Lightly touches the shrill cithern for her own pleasure.
She releases the abundant loveliness of her slender fingers
And stirs the dancing of her white sleeves.
She flashes her beautiful eyes in a circling glance;
One cannot tell whether she is smiling or not.
[From "Quieting the Affections" (#57).]

¹⁶ Four, counting the *fu* poem attached to and reiterating ideas found in T'ao's "Peach Blossom Source" essay.

¹⁷ Davis, vol.I, 190.

Yet such a poem, among a small minority of T'ao's work, only displays the poet's literary aptitude without adding his personal expression. In at least one example, then, T'ao simply limited himself within a literary tradition's conformities. However, T'ao's own thoughts could surface even within the traditional *fu* genre. In "Moved By Scholars" T'ao followed earlier examples lamenting a long list of virtuous men ill-treated by the world, but then went beyond previous models to ponder such a phenomenon in personal philosophical terms, with Taoist and Confucian references.¹⁸ In this sense he went beyond mere description and literary pyrotechnics to ponder an aspect of his worldly existence:

Why is the fair time so easily overturned?
 How is the victory of mischief so speedy?
 Azure Heaven is remote;
 Man's affairs have no end;
 Sometimes moved, sometimes unaware,
 Who can measure its workings?
 Better be 'firm in adversity' and save one's ideals,
 Than compromise and bring trouble to oneself.
 When carriage and cap are no glory,
 How should a hemp-quilted gown be a shame?
 Truly I am unlucky in my time and so choose simplicity;
 Let me with gladness turn to a state of rest.
 Cherishing my solitary feelings, I shall finish my years,
 And decline a good price from court and market-place.
 [From "Moved By Scholars' Not Meeting With Good Fortune" (#56).]

But where T'ao truly asserted his own feeling within the *fu* style, completely breaking out of convention, was in his famous "Return Home!" poem discussed earlier. As A.R. Davis indicates, "T'ao names no models here [as he does in his other two *fu*] because he is using *fu* form for a personal theme."¹⁹ Thus even within the constraints of a literary tradition T'ao Yüan-ming left his personal touch.

¹⁸ Hightower, "The Fu of T'ao Ch'ien," 210, 212; Davis, vol.I, 183-184. For philosophical references see *Tao Te Ching*, chapters 5 and 79; *Analects*, chapter 15, section 1.

¹⁹ Davis, vol.I, 194.

Aside from the continuity and change in traditional Chinese poetic styles, the growth of Buddhism spurred dramatic transformations in Chinese language and literature. In a fundamental sense, these changes resulted from the interaction between two radically different languages, Sanskrit and Chinese. Where Sanskrit was polyphonic, Chinese was monophthongal. Where Sanskrit used an alphabet, Chinese used ideograms. In linguistics alone, interaction with Sanskrit caused Chinese to advance far beyond earlier stages, reflecting closer language analysis from attempts to transfer, as accurately as possible, the sacredness of Buddhist sutras.²⁰ The effects on Chinese poetry became quite extensive and by the end of the Period of Disunity, linguistics played an intricate and dictating role in verse. The poetry of the following T'ang dynasty (618-906), though by common consent China's greatest, nevertheless showed the greater constraints and rules under which poetry had come to be composed.²¹ For the time being, however, Buddhism's greatest effect on Chinese poetry was in content, reflecting the influence of a metaphysical cosmology. Hsieh Ling-yün wrote the earliest and most famous examples of such poetry.

Hsieh Ling-yün, is traditionally called the father of "landscape poetry" or "mountain and water" poetry, whereas T'ao Yüan-ming was known as a "fields and garden" poet.²² But far more notable than the geography T'ao Yüan-ming and Hsieh Ling-yün described was their cosmological depiction of such

²⁰ Gernet, 232; Lai, 3-4.

²¹ Lai, 136-141; Watson, *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, 9-10.

²² Richard Mather, "The Landscape Buddhism of the Fifth-Century Poet Hsieh Ling-yün," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol.18 (1958-1959): 67; Watson, *Lyricism*, 79. Basically different geographical features described by T'ao Yüan-ming and Hsieh Ling-yün underlie these traditional classifications. For a critical analysis of the "mountain and water" classification, see Frodsham, pages 86-105.

landscape. Where T'ao described beautiful scenery with much personal affection, Hsieh Ling-yün's impressions were clearly Buddhist, seeing in Nature an environment for enlightenment.²³ In fact, one might go so far as to say that, under the influence of Buddhism, contemplating landscape became a meditation upon the Supreme Ultimate itself. Hsieh Ling-yün borrowed heavily from the landscape *fu* tradition and created his own landscape *shih* style.²⁴ Thus came to be "landscape Buddhism."²⁵ For instance, Hsieh Ling-yün wrote,

At dawn with staff in hand I climbed the crags,
 At dusk I made my camp among the mountains.
 Only a few peaks rise as high as this house,
 Facing the crags, it overlooks winding streams.
 In front of its gates a vast forest stretches,
 While boulders are heaped found its very steps.
 Hemmed in by mountains, there seems no way out,
 The track gets lost among the thick bamboos.
 My visitors can never find their way,
 And when they leave, forget the path they took.
 The raging torrents rush on through the dusk,
 The monkeys clamour shrilly through the night.
 Deep in meditation, how can I part from Truth?
 I cherish the Way and never will swerve from it.

[From "On Climbing the Highest Peak of Stone Gate," J.D. Frodsham, trans., *The Murmuring Stream*, 144.]

Or,

I go for walks with men of tranquil mind,
 Darkly it seems something can be descried.
 Light smoke drifts wind-borne on the pure air.
 Through the empty woods echoes the Drum of the Law.
 They tame sea-gulls and fishes by forgetting their minds,
 Daunt rhinoceros and tiger by holding firmly to life.
 One looks at these hills and longs for Vulture Peak,
 One's mind is led to thoughts of the Pure Land.
 Do but fix the heart on the Four Virtuous feelings,
 And for ever escape the woes of the Triple World.

[From "On Passing By Mount Ch'ü-ch'í I Give Alms to a Buddhist Monk," J.D. Frodsham, trans., *The Murmuring Stream*, 124.]

On the other hand, T'ao Yüan-ming described landscape much differently:

²³ Mather, "Landscape Buddhism," 68, 73-74, 78.

²⁴ Watson, *Lyricism*, 80.

²⁵ Frodsham, 100.

The air is mild; the sky is clear;
We arrange our places by the far-flowing waters.
In the gentle current race the striped bream;
In the secluded valley soar the crying gulls.
Over the distant marshes we ease over wandering eyes;
Far off, we gaze at the tiered hills.
Although without the splendour of the [K'un mountain],
To our reverent eye they have no equal.
[From "An Excursion to Hsieh-ch'uan" (#13).]

Typical of T'ao Yüan-ming, whether his subject be landscape, death, or farming, he focused on his own feelings in relation to the situation at hand. T'ao reflected no Buddhist influence, even though he must have been exposed to its blossoming cultural influence.²⁶ Such a void may indicate ambivalence or indifference, though probably not hostility, considering his amiable poems to Liu Ch'ai-sang and Chou Hsü-chih. Still, T'ao's absence of association once again describes something of his relation to his milieu.

It seems rather fitting that T'ao Yüan-ming retained his independence and individualism, spurning both his era's major sources of artistic patronage as well as writing apart from the period's dominant poetic trends. Instead, he withdrew from society and returned to the countryside alone where his unique poetry flowed forth naturally.

²⁶ Davis, vol.I, 10, 194.

Chapter 5 - Glimpses of T'ao Yüan-ming's Character

So far T'ao Yüan-ming has shown himself to be a lover of history and examples of high moral conduct, with something of a propensity to daydream or fantasize about an idyllic time or place. He has also revealed an appreciation of philosophical Taoism as well as a sentimental Confucianism, and obviously he aspired toward both Taoist and Confucian philosophical ideals. But seclusion presents the crux of T'ao Yüan-ming's story, for T'ao became legendary as a creative master in the Chinese sage-recluse tradition. Still, the poet's reclusive aspect raises certain questions. How sincere were T'ao's reclusive ideals? Did he genuinely seek realization of these ideals, or was he using his poetry to cast merely an image of himself in the esteemed sage-recluse tradition?¹ Before considering T'ao Yüan-ming himself in relation to such questions, it is very

¹ A.R. Davis creates his main premise around the idea that T'ao Yüan-ming "effectively created his own legend [of sage-recluse] in his own lifetime." Davis states, "The true quality of T'ao Yüan-ming ... is an artistic truth which resides in his works, for all that the author seems so strongly to reveal his personality." Davis, vol.I, 3, 4.

important to ponder his greater cultural context, one that greatly esteemed the sage-recluse.² Such esteem had developed over many centuries.

The tradition of withdrawing from the world began before the age of Confucius. As discussed earlier, Po-i and Shu-ch'í withdrew to the mountains during the eleventh-century B.C. with the fall of the Shang dynasty. Confucius praised these men for their loyalty, and Confucius himself helped make seclusion a more canonized moral practice, saying things like, "As my Way does not prevail, I will embark on a ship and sail over the sea." Or, "Of all those who followed me and shared hardships with me in my wanderings in Ch'en and Ts'ai, I do not now see a single one who has entered public service."³ At this point, during the Confucian era, seclusion changed from a spontaneous political protest or rejection of worldly troubles into more of a systematized tradition in which recluses sought recognition for their sacrifice as noble men. With this development came the "convention of the recluse being summoned to court," and thus the ready possibility of insincere withdrawal.⁴

But whether sincere withdrawal or feigned reclusiveness, by T'ao Yüan-ming's era a sage-recluse tradition was clearly established,⁵ substantiated by a large corpus of poetry bemoaning unappreciated scholars and sages.⁶ By T'ao Yüan-ming's lifetime the sage-recluse tradition embodied several centuries

² Davis, vol.I, 85-86.

³ *Analects*, chapter 5, section 6; chapter 11, section 2. See Hung-ming Ku, trans., *English Translation of the Analects*, 19, 53.

⁴ Li, 236-240.

⁵ Davis, vol.I, 222.

⁶ Hightower, "The Fu of T'ao Ch'ien," 209.

of high-minded gentlemen who, because of their unsavory political milieu or their noble aspirations toward spiritual perfection -- or both -- retired from the human world and sought enlightenment and communion with Nature. Legendary figures peopled the sage-recluse tradition; many of them altogether mythical, most of them romanticized, all of them idealized. Hermit sages such as the "Four White-heads" were thought to have withdrawn from the violent Ch'in Shih Huang Ti era (221-210 B.C.) to live out their lives on Mt. Shang. Yen Hui Yüan (ca. sixth century, B.C.), known as Confucius' favorite disciple, gained a reputation for virtuous behavior and for dying impoverished, as befitted a true scholar. As recorded in the Confucian *Analects*, Jung Ch'i-ch'i (ca. sixth century B.C.), is depicted as winning Confucius' admiration as an enlightened old man embodying the ideals of an impoverished gentleman. All these figures found their way into T'ao's poetry.⁷

To an important extent, T'ao Yüan-ming cast himself in the sage-recluse tradition. Sometimes he borrowed heavily from traditional hermit imagery, revealing little of his character beyond just an inclination to cast himself as sage-recluse. For example, T'ao devoted an entire poem to praising eight legendary recluses,⁸ then directly associated himself with them, offering little more than praise and self-pronouncement. Practically any scholar might have said

⁷ See, for example, "Moved by Scholars" (#56), "Drinking Wine II, XI", (#42), "Singing of Poor Scholars" III (#50), and even T'ao's own elegy, written by Yen Yen-chih (384-456).

⁸ The Old Man with the Basket, Ch'ang-chü, Chieh-ni, Wu-ling Tzu-chung, Chang Ch'ang-kung, Ping Man-jung, Cheng Tz'u-tu, Hsüeh Meng-cheng, and Chou Yang-kuei.

"Distantly one recalls those of a thousand years ago / In community with them one must wander alone."⁹

Or, after recounting numerous ill-fated men, such as Tung Chung-shu (who was forced out of office by political rivals) or Po-i (a virtuous man who starved to death in the mountains), T'ao pronounced "Truly I am unlucky in my time and so choose simplicity / Let me with gladness turn to a state of rest / Cherishing my solitary feelings, I shall finish my years."¹⁰ None of T'ao's own character comes forth beyond this direct association.

Again, in speaking of noble men responding to hunger (naturally a condition not uncommon for those who have relinquished an official salary), T'ao said, "Firmness in adversity"¹¹ was early my resort / If one is hungry, that's all there is to it / In the past there are many models for me."¹² Such illustrations¹³ tell us little about the poet except that he wished to cast himself with the sage-recluse tradition. Yet T'ao's very inclination to depict himself as a hermit tells us something significant about his own character and his culture.

To begin, T'ao needed to justify his withdrawal to himself and others. As a member of the educated class, T'ao was under a social and cultural obligation to serve in the political bureaucracy. Becoming a farmer meant stepping down a social level, and no scholar-official could make such a move without some sort

⁹ "Appraisals For Paintings Upon a Fan" (#63)

¹⁰ "Moved By Scholars' Not Meeting With Good Fortune" (#56).

¹¹ From the Confucian *Analects*, chapter 15, section 1.

¹² "Written When I Had a Perception" (#46).

¹³ Others entirely devoted to such a mode include the seven-poem series "Singing of Poor Scholars" (#50) and "Drinking Wine, XII" (#42).

of rationalization. Many turned to Buddhism in these circumstances, exploiting that religion's otherworldiness to escape the Period of Disunity's inherently dangerous political realm. T'ao, on the other hand, sought to utilize the Confucian / Taoist sage-recluse tradition. He relied on it to bolster his cause. How deep his association was with the sage-recluse tradition - whether only an inclination toward casting an image of himself as a noble hermit, or an indication of a deep affinity for the ideals behind the sage-recluse tradition - will always remain open to interpretation. Most likely there were elements of both, for it seems that T'ao's personal nature was quite complex and multifaceted. Certainly he did not rely solely on the sage-recluse tradition to support his reclusive cause, for often he simply describes or symbolizes his reclusive nature or circumstances without any legendary allusions.

In one of his most famous self-portrayals, a "biographical" essay entitled "Gentleman of Five Willows," T'ao entered the realm of describing himself as a recluse independently of the sage-recluse tradition. Of the "Gentleman of Five Willows" T'ao wrote:

His house 'with surrounding walls only a few paces long' [describing the traditional impoverished scholar's abode] is lonely and does not shelter him from wind and sun. His short coarse robe is torn and mended. His dishes and gourds are 'often empty'. Yet he is at peace. He constantly delights himself with writing in which he widely expresses his own ideals. He is unmindful of gain or loss, and thus he will be to the end.

[See A.R. Davis, *T'ao Yüan-ming (AD 365-427): His Works and Their Meaning*, 2 vols., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); vol.I, 208; vol.II, 121.]

T'ao wrote in the same mode when he uses obvious symbolism, such as a lost bird or a solitary pine tree, to depict himself as a hermit. For instance, personifying himself, T'ao wrote: "Fluttering is the bird which has come home / It had soared; it had flown / Yet it was not fond of wandering / When it saw the

wood, its heart yearned."¹⁴ Such verse, devoted exclusively to this type of symbolism, would seem to have no purpose other than enhancing T'ao's image as a recluse. Though no hermit predecessors are cited, the effect of casting himself as a hermit remains the same. Similarly, T'ao conveyed his reclusiveness through a bird, his hermitage through a lone pine: "[The bird's] goings and comings, how full of yearning! / Now because it has lighted on this solitary pine / It has folded its wings and come home from afar," concluding, "To entrust its body, it has found a place / In a thousand years it would not part from it."¹⁵ And perhaps most self-consciously, T'ao wrote: "The green pine stands in the eastern garden / The mass of plants obscures its beauty / When stiffening frost destroys other kinds / I see its tall branches standing out / Of the continuous forest men are not aware / At the solitary tree everyone marvels."¹⁶

All this symbolism further casts T'ao as a hermit. Again, whether such a portrayal reflects true, deep feelings or just an exterior creation of a sage-recluse image remains open to interpretation. However, sometimes intermixed with reclusive imagery, T'ao's also insisted that he needed to be "true to his own nature." Such a declaration adds another possible dimension to his whole sage-recluse self-depiction.

In one of his most famous works, "Return Home!," T'ao asserted, "the spontaneity of my nature cannot be forced and coerced. Though hunger and cold

¹⁴ "The Bird Which Has Come Home" (#9).

¹⁵ "Drinking Wine, IV" (#42).

¹⁶ "Drinking Wine, VIII" (#42).

are pressing, to go against myself makes me ill.”¹⁷ T’ao extended this idea beyond himself to embrace a general sense of personal integrity involved with remaining true to oneself. For instance, he commented “Once gone in death, what do we know? / To accord with our hearts is truly best.”¹⁸ And again, “The good man acts according to his own feelings / How should he ever err in ‘appearing or keeping silent’ [taking political service or withdrawing].”¹⁹ Obviously T’ao admired such a trait as a mark of virtue. In praising his maternal grandfather, Meng Chia (fl. mid-fourth century), T’ao wrote: “he had renounced fame and did not take office. He always followed his own heart and went his own way.”²⁰ Focusing back to himself, T’ao wrote, “My bodily frame has long since transformed / But if my heart is constant, what more is there to say?”²¹

T’ao’s insistence on remaining true to himself (which required withdrawing from society) may indicate a further affirmation of his reclusive image, an inherently solitary aspect of his temperament, or some mixture of both. Indeed, this may be the first indication of T’ao’s personal feeling beyond sage-recluse imagery. It is T’ao’s emotional expression that separates him from mere sage-recluse romance. When he expressed personal feelings, even amidst a reclusive setting, we begin to recognize deeper aspects of T’ao’s character as well as indications of a true reclusive nature - not just an image.

¹⁷ “Return Home!” (#58).

¹⁸ “Drinking Wine, XI” (#42).

¹⁹ “Drinking Wine, XVIII” (#42).

²⁰ Davis, vol.I, 205.

²¹ “Drinking Alone During Continuous Rains” (#20).

Four poems, (written over a ten year period, 400-410), suggest a deeper current of personal feeling that superseded reclusive imagery. In 400, while returning to his rural home after his first and longest period of political service (395-400), T'ao found his journey across a lake delayed by opposing winds, causing him homesickness and anxiety to be on his way. T'ao said, "Counting the days, I yearn for my old home / My first joy will be to attend my kind parent / A second pleasure will be to see my brothers." But a southern wind forces his boat into a cove where he must wait. "Straining my eyes, I make out the southern hills / Vainly I sigh - when shall we go on?" he wondered. The poem, however, turned from homesickness and anxiety to address reclusiveness. "Quietly I think of the joys of garden and woods / For which the world of me is well resigned / The years of my prime, how many can they be? / To follow my heart, why should I hesitate longer?"²² T'ao's announcement to follow his reclusive inclination remains, as in other poems, open to interpretation. However, the fact that the majority of the poem reflects only homesickness and anxiety distinguish it from poems merely associating T'ao with the sage-recluse tradition. His anxiety and homesickness, most likely free of ulterior design, dominate this poem, leaving an overall impression of T'ao Yüan-ming the poet - no longer just T'ao Yüan-ming the image. Similar poems offer further illumination.

In the winter of 403, during one of his intermittent retirements (in this case, while in mourning for his mother), T'ao expressed humility in the face of his hermit reality and, indeed, in light of legendary sage-recluses. He began by

²² "Detained By Contrary Winds" (#32).

depicting his solitary lot: "I have come to rest 'under a cross-beam door'²³ / Where I am remote and cut off from the world." Yet after much description of his rather bleak circumstances - one of cold, hunger, loneliness, and joylessness - he expressed humility when regarding former recluses' examples: "I look through thousand-year-old books / Time and again I see records of heroes / To such high principles I have not aspired / By error achieved 'firmness in adversity'."²⁴ Of course, this may have all been a clever, self-conscious ploy. Yet this element of humility stands out from works only casting T'ao as a wise hermit. Where the "Gentleman of Five Willows" was "unmindful of gain or loss," here T'ao does not aspire to such high ideals.

Two years later (early 405), while journeying away from his rural home toward his second-to-last political position (the final position ending in late 405), T'ao quite vividly overrode any sage-recluse imagery by depicting his actual situation. After recounting his youthful inclination to remain withdrawn from the world, T'ao sadly related his present circumstances:

My eyes weary of the strangeness of river and road;
My mind recalls my life amid hills and valleys.
Gazing at the clouds, I am mortified by the high-flying birds;
Surveying the waters, I feel shamed by the darting fish.
Since the ideal of the true was from the first in my breast,
Who shall say I am bound by my body's circumstances?
For the present I'll submit to the changes of things,
But in the end I shall return to Master Pan's dwelling.*
*A hermitage.
["Written When Passing Through Ch'ü-o" (#31)]

The crucial element here centers on T'ao's voluntary political service. At all times his choice between service and farming were totally his own. Political service was

²³ A traditional symbol of hermitage.

²⁴ "Written For My Cousin Ching-yüan" (#35).

a great honor still dominated by the aristocracy. Political opportunity remained almost exclusive to the privileged educated class, to which T'ao Yüan-ming belonged. Therefore, in rejecting political service T'ao relinquished his birthright to the highest Chinese social class. As T'ao's poems indicate, he wavered on this point for some time, intermittently serving in politics for ten years before permanently retiring. Thus, more than anything, T'ao's indecision indicated his inner conflict, taking us deeper into his reclusive character and reality, far beyond superficial sage-recluse imagery. This reality became manifest five years into his retirement, in 410, when farming's daily toil clearly offset any romanticizing of the sage-recluse.

T'ao began with a very sober pronouncement: "Man's life is a matter of 'possessing the Way' / But food and clothing truly are its beginnings / How can one make no provision whatever for these / And yet seek contentment for oneself?" He went on to relate something about his daily toil, admitting "To be a farmer is surely a harsh lot / One cannot refuse these hardships / My four limbs are truly exhausted," quite persuasively countering idyllic reclusiveness. In ending the poem T'ao claimed: "Remote in time are the minds of Chü and Ni;²⁵ / Despite the thousand years there is affinity / I only wish that I may continue like this / At ploughing with my own hand I have no complaint."²⁶ Yet these final lines seem self-exhorting as much as anything. If T'ao had no complaint, why would he have written a poem describing his harsh circumstances at all? More

²⁵ Two recluses.

²⁶ "Harvesting The Dry Rice" (#40).

accurately, this poem seems to indicate, again, inner conflict and an attempt to reconcile himself with his recluse reality.

But T'ao's feelings beyond the romantic sage-recluse tradition were not always discouraging or sad. In fact, his most magnificent poem in this vein finds him at peace with himself, delighting in his young son learning to talk. He admires ancient sages but does not cast himself with them; rather, only deeply respects them for their mystery and wisdom. He wrote, "Putting the cup to my lips, I think of you, recluses / A thousand years after, I cherish your principles / Searching their essence, I cannot unfold it / Quietly I shall pass this happy month."²⁷

Certainly T'ao was not preoccupied with depicting himself as a sage-recluse or, for that matter, even writing about sage-recluse subject matter. Much of his work addresses another theme entirely - life's transience. This theme affords a new, deeper aspect of the poet's character, for in expressing his feelings about such a universal topic, T'ao's humanity revealed itself beyond any conventional cultural images.

At its most severe, T'ao's brooding over life's transience centered on fear of death. After returning from the outside world to rural solitude (probably sometime between 400-406), T'ao subsumed much sage-recluse imagery by a stronger feeling of sadness at the vanity of fleeting human existence. Though he began happily, saying "For a long while I have been inside a cage / Once more I

²⁷ "Answering a Poem by Registrar Kuo" (#24).

have been able to return to Nature," he soon found despair in human life: "Man's life is like an illusion's changes / In the end it must return to nothing."²⁸

Again, returning to his old home after an long absence, T'ao found sadness in his heart, as returning to former places often evokes. "Although today is my first day back / Yet I am sad and have many griefs." The changes that have taken place in his absence provoke thoughts of death and especially fear of dying young. "I constantly fear the great changes' ending / While my vigour has not come to decline."²⁹ He ended by seeking to banish such thoughts with a cup of wine.

T'ao expressed similar sentiments on the Double Ninth Festival (ninth day of the ninth lunar month) in 409. "Ten thousand transformations follow one another / Man's life, how should it not be laborious? / From of old all have had to die / When I think of it, my heart within me burns."³⁰ These "ten thousand changes," the nature of worldly existence, did not always evoke despair in T'ao, sometimes only sadness. Upon bidding goodbye to a banquet guest, T'ao wrote: "As we turn our carriages, we linger in sadness / Our eyes follow the returning boat into the distance / Our feelings are left amid the Ten Thousand Changes."³¹ Still, T'ao did not always dwell on this gloomy side.

On the occasion of another outing, this time to a place in view of tombs - and thus a reminder of death - T'ao reacted quite differently from his mood of

²⁸ "Returning to Live in the Country" (#12).

²⁹ "Returning to My Old Home" (#37).

³⁰ "The Ninth Day" (#39).

³¹ "Seeing Off a Guest" (#25).

despair. "Moved by those men [buried] under the cypresses / How could we not make merry?" And: "We don't know yet tomorrow's affairs / But what's in our hearts has truly been expressed."³² Again during an outing, T'ao and his friends enjoyed the weather and scenery. T'ao wrote: "In the midst of drinking we give ranging thoughts rein / And forget those 'thousand years' sorrows' / Let us enjoy to the full today's pleasure / Of tomorrow we do not ask."³³

T'ao revealed too many of his own feelings and too much of his mundane reality to have taken a romantic sage-recluse image of himself very seriously. However, the fact remained that deeper philosophical and moral ideals lay behind the popular sage-recluse tradition itself. After all, though many legendary figures comprised the sage-recluse tradition, these figures did embody Confucian and Taoist ideals. Whether some of these sages were or were not actual historical figures becomes essentially irrelevant. Certainly T'ao came to hold these ideals for himself, for philosophical idealism and longing for spiritual perfection pervade his work.

Almost an obverse of dwelling on life's transience, T'ao's Taoist philosophical outlook conceived an inspirational and serene acceptance of human life. In fact, he sometimes expresses such serenity directly in relation to life's transience. But far different from mourning such transience, he merely recognized the fleeting nature of human existence, acknowledging it almost incidentally, as though it were only a temporary condition accompanying an

³² "We All Enjoy Ourselves" (#16).

³³ "An Excursion to Hsieh-ch'uan" (#13)

eternal realization. He wrote: "In Nature's changes difficulties may come or not / But to follow one's ideals is a level road."³⁴ Again, while caught in a melancholy mood, saddened by passing time and life's limitations, T'ao writes: "Luxuriant is the tree in blossom / Here it has lodged its roots / Its many flowers open in the morning / Alas! In the evening they are gone." But in light of such wistful transience, T'ao immediately responds, "Resolution and weakness depend on the man; / 'For ill or good fortune there are no gates' / Except the Way on what may we rely? / Except goodness what should we strive for?" Finally, he found cause to gauge himself in terms of such philosophical vision. He wrote:

The former master [Confucius] left a teaching;
How should I ever abandon it?
'If at forty he is not heard of,
Then he is not worthy of respect.'*
Grease my famous chariot!
Whip up my famous horses!
A thousand *li*, though far,
How dare I not go?
*Confucian *Analects*, chapter 9, section 22.
["The Tree in Blossom" (#3).]

In this poem T'ao chastised himself for unworthiness, yet seeks to encourage himself by maintaining his philosophical vision.

T'ao's appreciation of "firmness in adversity"³⁵ further attested to his respect for Confucianism. In recalling Jung Ch'i-ch'i T'ao wrote: "When at ninety he still had a rope for a girdle / What hunger and cold he must have had in his prime! / Unless he relied on the principle of 'firmness in adversity' / Who should be handed down for a hundred generations?"³⁶ Again, in measuring his own humble

³⁴ "To Answer a Poem by Registrar Tai" (#19).

³⁵ Confucian *Analects*, chapter 15, section 1.

³⁶ "Drinking Wine, II" (#42).

achievements in life, T'ao drew upon Confucianism: "Although the basket employed is small / Going on to the end, one makes a mound."³⁷

Most openly, T'ao praised Confucius himself: "Concerned was the old man in Lu [Confucius] / To mend his age and make it pure / Although the phoenix did not come³⁸ / The *Rites* and *Music*³⁹ a while were renewed." And revering the Confucian tradition, T'ao wrote: "Meticulous were all the old [Han dynasty Confucianists] / In their task they were truly careful / How is that after the fall of their age [the Han dynasty] / The Six Scriptures⁴⁰ find no affection at all?"⁴¹

While obviously educated in the Confucian Classics and respectful of Confucianism's moral ideals, T'ao drew more heavily upon Taoist philosophy as befit his circumstances. At the core of Taoist philosophy, T'ao expressed a profound appreciation for the dualistic nature of the universe and human life, viewing good and evil, fame and failure, public service and private reclusion with typical Taoist relativity. T'ao wrote: "Failure and success have no fixed abodes / One man then another alternately shares them." Also, "Cold and heat have their alterations / And man's course is ever like this."⁴² Here he recognized the two sides of nature's dualism as complementary to and interacting with each other.

³⁷ "To My Grandfather's Cousin" (#4). The quote is from the Confucian *Analects*, chapter 9, section 18 - emphasizing the worth of effort.

³⁸ Meaning, a wise emperor did not arise.

³⁹ Two of the Confucian Classics

⁴⁰ The six Confucian Classics: the *Book of Changes*, the *Book of Odes*, the *Book of History*, the *Book of Rites*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and the *Book of Music*. The *Book of Music* was lost in ancient times, and later scholars sometimes used the *Rites of the Chou* as a substitute. See Chan, 580-581, note 39.

⁴¹ "Drinking Wine, XX" (#42).

⁴² "Drinking Wine, I" (#42).

Wisdom lies in realizing this truth and serenely accepting it, an ideal to which T'ao aspired. He wrote: "The piling up of good is said to have its reward / Yet [Po-]ji and Shu[-ch'i]⁴³ were on the western hill / If good and evil do not secure their proper response / What use is it to make vain propositions?"⁴⁴ Finally: "Going and stopping have a thousand myriad reasons / Who knows which is right and which is wrong? / Right and wrong simply reveal each other / 'Alike as thunderclaps', men praise and blame."⁴⁵

To an important degree, much of T'ao's Taoist philosophy was contingent upon wine. As such, T'ao certainly fit into his cultural milieu, for from the time of the Seven Sages wine had been highly regarded as an aesthetic aid. One of the Seven Sages, Liu Ling, even wrote a famous essay entitled the "Bible of Wine." For T'ao in particular, wine seemed to inspire him with a serene vision of the world. For instance, he wrote: "Cold and heat have their alternations / And man's course is ever like this / The intelligent man has an understanding of it / So he does not remain doubtful any longer / Swiftly he joins his single wine jar /

⁴³ The two virtuous brothers who starved to death in the mountains during the eleventh-century B.C.

⁴⁴ "Drinking Wine, II" (#42).

⁴⁵ "Drinking Wine, VI" (#42). This poem and the two preceding find a correlation in, for example, chapter two of the *Tao Te Ching*, the original Taoist canon:

When all the world knows beauty as beauty,
There is ugliness.
When they know good as good,
There is evil.

In this way
Existence and nonexistence produce each other.
Difficult and easy complete each other.
Long and short contrast each other.
High and low attract each other.
Pitch and tone harmonize each other.
Future and past follow each other.

[R.L. Wing, trans.]

At the day's close he delights to hold it."⁴⁶ Further: "I try a draught and all feelings are remote / A second cup and immediately I forget Heaven / Heaven surely is not removed from here / If one trusts in the True, one does not take first place."⁴⁷

Finally, wine offered a path toward enlightenment. T'ao wrote of he and some friends drinking:

In pouring from the jar we lose the order of going round.
When I am not aware of knowing my existence,
How should I know what things are valuable?
Remote, I have strayed from the place where we are;
In wine there are deep flavours.
["Drinking Wine, XIV" (#42)]

"When I am not aware of knowing my existence" means, of course, losing a sense of Self, a Taoist ideal.

Naturally this leads to the most profound aspect of T'ao Yüan-ming's character, his Taoist insight. Taoist insight means possessing an intuitive grasp of mystical truths. No logic can approach mysticism. Mysticism, by definition, remains alogical. Directly in the tradition of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu (the original Taoist sages) themselves, T'ao comprehended the highly esoteric core of Taoist mysticism. This appreciation goes quite far in revealing the depth of T'ao Yüan-ming himself.

⁴⁶ "Drinking Wine, I" (#42).

⁴⁷ "Drinking Alone During Continuous Rains" (#20). The last line corresponds nicely with chapter sixty-seven of the *Tao Te Ching*:

I have Three Treasures that support and protect:
The first is compassion.
The second is moderation.
The third is daring not to be first in the world.
[R.L. Wing, trans.]

In what Chinese historians and literary critics have long regarded as one of T'ao's obscure works, a distinct mysticism pervades. Just like Taoist mysticism, it must be intuitively grasped; logic will not do. Here T'ao captured an elusive quality: "In my singing shallow words are achieved / For in wine how much pleasure there is! / How many things I still cannot understand! / On Chang [mountain] there are unusual songs."⁴⁸ The point here is T'ao's appreciation of life's mystery. Chang mountain's unusual songs indicate such mystery, and typically Taoist, T'ao will not talk about it, only indicate it, counting on the reader to perceive his meaning intuitively. T'ao himself admitted his limited understanding. Yet he appreciated this mystery, whether he has achieved the enlightenment that would unfold it or not. By such appreciation, and by such a mystical reticence, T'ao entered the most profound depths of Taoism, a philosophy "beyond words."⁴⁹

Also entering the realm of "philosophy beyond words," and expressing Chuang Tzu's idea of the true sage remaining solitary amidst a crowd, T'ao wrote in one of his most famous poems:

I have built my hut within men's borders,
 But there is no noise of carriage or horses.
 If you ask how this is possible:

⁴⁸ "The Day of the Cha Sacrifice" (#47).

⁴⁹ As expressed in the *Tao Te Ching*:

Therefore, Evolved Individuals
 Hold their position without effort,
 Practice their philosophy without words. (chapter two)

Or,

This philosophy without words,
 This advantage without action -
 It is rare, in the world, to attain them. (chapter forty-three)
 [R.L. Wing, trans.]

When the heart is remote, the place becomes like it.
As I pluck chrysanthemums beneath the eastern fence,
I distantly see the southern mountains.
The mountains' aspect is fair at close of day;
The flying birds return in flocks.
In this there is a true idea,
But when I would express it, I forget the words.
[*"Drinking Wine, V"* (#42)]

Such a perspective seems reminiscent of Chung Tzu's idea of a sage: "Tolerant, [the sage] seemed to be part of the world; towering alone, he could be checked by nothing; withdrawn, he seemed to prefer to cut himself off; bemused, he forgot what he was going to say."⁵⁰ Therefore T'ao showed himself heir to the original Taoist tradition. Not only did T'ao fully comprehend Taoism, he also continued the Taoist tradition with further poetic expression. As such he should be appreciated as much for his mystical vision as his poetic genius.

Obviously T'ao Yüan-ming was a complex man with many sides. His work certainly reflects his cultural and historical context; though it also goes well beyond these circumstances to reveal the poet himself. His poetry at least begins to offer glimpses into aspects of his multifaceted character. T'ao deliberately associated himself with the sage-recluse tradition to some degree, but also superseded such an exterior image to express deep emotion. His fluctuating moods (such as his various responses to life's transience) reflect his temperament and humanity; his use of wine indicates search for inspiration and contact with his muse. He expressed a full range of response to the human condition, but also

⁵⁰ Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 75.

an appreciation for its deepest mysteries. His philosophical appreciation and Taoist insight reflect the depth of his mind.

T'ao Yüan-ming and his sage-recluse image remain, to a great degree, open to speculation and interpretation. Perhaps T'ao wished to be remembered in a certain way or to be seen in a certain way during his own lifetime. T'ao may have even enjoyed dramatizing himself *to* himself, casting himself in the image of sage-recluse, the wise poet who withdrew from the violent and unpredictable Eastern Chin political world (more of a Confucian withdrawal) or the enlightened recluse who merely rejected worldly existence altogether (emulating the Taoist ideal). Such self-dramatization might have comforted T'ao, on occasion, during his daily toils and troubles as a farmer, an existence obviously somewhat at odds with T'ao's intellectual potential, education, and creative genius. The fact that he picked the sage-recluse image to begin with indicates both the esteem such an image held in Chinese culture and the probability that T'ao at least admired, if not aspired toward, the philosophical ideals the sage-recluse tradition represented. Such a sincere aspiration is worth noting, for unlike his wealthy contemporaries, such as Hsieh Ling-yün, who could comfortably romanticize reclusiveness while pursuing immortality through religious Taoism,⁵¹ T'ao's hermitage approached the stark reality of relative poverty and loneliness. And yet his spirit triumphed over these physical circumstances. T'ao produced a wealth of excellent poetry despite his reclusive life's very real hardships. In this sense he certainly earned his solitary philosophical and mystical aspirations.

⁵¹ Frodsham, 50.

Interestingly enough, finding T'ao the Taoist leads right back to T'ao the artist, for the two are interrelated. T'ao's Taoist expressions are beautiful, to a great extent, because they are poetic expressions. This is quite congruous with Taoism itself since, in a sense, the entire *Tao Te Ching* and certain passages in the *Chuang Tzu* may also be regarded as poetry, appreciated for their poetic as well as mystical beauty, and thus quite similar to T'ao's own work. In this way, T'ao rightfully follows and compliments Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu's Taoist tradition. On the other hand, far more than Lao Tzu or Chuang Tzu, T'ao reveals himself, the human poet.

Conclusion

T'ao Yüan-ming's poetry offers a profound view of one of China's greatest cultural heroes. Not only does T'ao's verse reflect his participation in the Chinese sage-recluse tradition, but also reveals very personal aspects of the reclusive man behind this tradition. The universal human desire to capture emotion in art survives in T'ao Yüan-ming's work, and modern readers may bridge many centuries and a tremendously different culture to share some of this poet's emotions and feelings. In this sense, T'ao's poetic legacy remains much more intimate than many formal biographies. T'ao Yüan-ming will probably always remain somewhat mysterious, for only partial historical evidence surrounds his life and his verse remains his most complete autobiographical source. But though the details of his life will likely remain obscure, several overall impressions of his character arise.

T'ao was a loner who sought solace in wine. His loneliness seems to have been an intense inner quality, for he was not only without a large number of

friends, but more importantly, suffered from an absence of truly close friends who might have shared his ideals and feelings. That T'ao so often wrote of his loneliness, despite having a wife and children, would seem to substantiate his loneliness as an inner quality. T'ao's utilization of wine was probably just that -- an artistic tool more than anything else. It was a method by which he sought his muse, finding a source of poetic and philosophical inspiration. It is doubtful that he was an alcoholic in an abject, self-destructive sense, for he lived a relatively long life during which he derived much creative energy and artistic results from wine.

T'ao was tormented by inner conflicts concerning social norms and private convictions, cultural and family traditions, and his own measure of himself in relation to his personal philosophical goals. Confucian and Taoist ideals helped sustain his personal conviction to withdraw from the world, but his family tradition of public distinction sometimes plagued his conscience, as did the fact that his own intelligence, education and talent went socially unrewarded. As an artist, T'ao's main purpose was to seek his muse. He seems to have done this at all costs, forsaking social position and wealth, living a rather solitary life, until seeking his muse was probably his most important priority. Obviously this kind of sacrifice was not without its conflict. T'ao may have felt displaced by his immediate social and political circumstances, but probably sought seclusion more for reasons stemming from his own internal makeup. Political and social intrigues may have repelled him for all their typical sordidness, but, more

importantly, such intrigues were incompatible with his propensity to dream and create.

T'ao appreciated life's transience and the limitations of human existence, seeking an identity with an idealized history and cultural tradition, even escaping into fantasy during his lighter moments. His fantasy pieces seem to be only a certain expression of his solitary day-dreaming, not unrelated to his repeated reference to idealized historical precedent. Yet T'ao's mundane reality of farming and physical labor and the bare necessities of living offset such idealization and creative serenity. Still, he never seems to have despaired for long and continued his creative endeavors despite hardships and his acute knowledge of his own mortality.

The legend of T'ao Yüan-ming that remains alive today stems from a personal and literary greatness. In poetic expertise alone, the great age of Chinese poetry would not come until the T'ang dynasty several centuries after T'ao Yüan-ming's death. But few Chinese cultural heroes match T'ao in both personal integrity and creative genius. Though the development and perpetuation of the T'ao Yüan-ming legend offers an entire cultural study in itself, perhaps the combination of remarkable personality and excellent poetry remain the key to T'ao Yüan-ming's enduring fame.

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Vita

Will Sarvis was born on July 31, 1959 in Berkeley, California. As the son of an artist, he spent ten years getting a BA in history at Virginia Tech, interspersing his academic education with cross-country hitchhiking, commercial longline fishing, tree-planting, tree-cutting, drywall construction, and other activities. He finally graduated in 1987 and went to Taiwan for a year of Chinese language study. After finishing his Master's degree he will return to Asia.

Will Sarvis