

陶 淵 明 詩 文 英 譯

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TAO YUANMING

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An English Translation by

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The Translator's Note

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Tao Yuanming of the Eastern Jin Dynasty ranks high among China's greatest poets. He is undoubtedly the very greatest in view of the enormous bearing he had on subsequent generations of poets, most notably Li Bai (Li Po), Du Fu (Tu Fu) and Bai Juyi (Po Chu-i) of the Tang Dynasty, as well as Su Dongpo (Su T'ung-po) and Lu You (Lu Yu) of the Song Dynasty. Su Dongpo's admiration for the poet was so intense that he modeled a hundred and nine poems on those of Tao Yuanming with a view to matching and echoing the poetic utterances of his illustrious predecessor, while Lu You maintained to the end of his long and fruitful life that poetry could not be learned without conscientious study of Tao Yuanming's works. Across the ages, seldom has there been a poet who failed to pay highest tribute to his sublime genius. He is one of the few most read Chinese poets whose artless appeal has endured undiminished over the centuries.

Influential commentators of the past had variously identified him as "the recluse poet of all times", the "father of pastoral poetry" and

"the poet unstained by worldly dust". A survey of his works extant shows that he was a great deal more than a withdrawn painter of nature. First and foremost he was a man of sterling integrity. His disenchantment with the realities of life turned him off the beaten path of fame and gain. True to his own nature and the values he espoused from youth, he broke free, when still in his prime, from his intermittent bondage to officialdom and retired to work his acres of land and cultivate his selfhood in direct communion with nature. Though out of tune with the world, he remained intensely human. In the seclusion of his thatched-roofed cottage he lived out his days among simple, true-hearted countryfolk, sharing with them the joys and hardships of rural life. By his own example he restored the dignity of labour and celebrated the virtue of plain living. With nostalgic yearning he looked back to the golden age of antiquity when all enjoyed in an equal measure the bounties of nature; when people produced but did not hoard.

"Proud was man and self-sufficient,
Simple in his ways and unspoiled.

As he grew in wit and skill,

To want he was reduced",

he thus described to the villagers in 'hortation to Rural Labour. This recurrent theme is carried further in Reflections on Unfortunate Scholars:

"That happy condition did not last,

Into groups and classes the world split up.

The fish took fright when the net was spun,

The birds panicked when the snare was laid.

The wise were quick to see the change,

Refuge they found in tillage."

His primitivist bent (often mistaken for escapism) and his naturalist perception of life and the universe reflect the very essence of the Taoist philosophy of Lau Zi (Lao-tzu) and Zhuang Zi (Chuang-tzu) in its unadulterated purity. The bulk of his writings reveal him as a philosopher of great depth of mind and soul who communicated in imagery and rhyme.

In a culture predominantly Confucian, where rank and emolument were the coveted reward for scholastic pursuits and where promising scholars were expected to distinguish themselves in public life, Tao Yuanming's complete break with time-honoured conventionality was without precedent.

The proud independence he thereby regained, though it be at the sacrifice of an otherwise handsome livelihood, brought about the full blossoming of his serene personality.

"A captive in the cage for years,
Back to nature I've found my way",
he cried out in jubilation in *Back to Country Life*.
In his well-known poetic prose *Homeward Ho!* he again gave utterance to his elation at having severed his links with the heartless, bustling world:

"Leaning on the south window, the world I waved off with cold disdain, aware of the cosy comfort the tiniest hut provides",
he wrote after deploring in the poem's prologue the decade wasted in servitude:

"Sharp had been the sting of cold and hunger; having to go against my grain caused me even greater anguish. The urge to keep alive had prompted me to slave away at my former posts. The thought of having sacrificed my life's ideal to my stomach filled me with remorse and shame."

Line upon line of balanced verse came streaming from the many-voiced fountain of knowledge and beauty. His aphoristic wisdom,
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keen sensibility, rich imagery, tranquil passion, melodious pathos, exquisite humour, unerring taste as well as his tender exaltation of love and friendship embody what was best in China's cultural heritage.

"Having made light of glory while alive, I can't care less about posthumous fame. Hard it was to trudge through life. Would it be any the easier to cope with death? How woefully sad!"

On this note of pathetic resignation ended the poetic flow and, with it, the earthly sojourn of this solitary "parting guest" (Eight Miscellaneous Poems, no. 7) -- a poet in every sense unique.

Paradoxically, he who shunned worldly fame and honours in the hermitage of his rustic home should have become a source of ennobling inspiration to a whole line of eminent Chinese poets and scholars. More than any other poet, he enjoys the deep veneration of posterity, due not so much to the sensory appeal of his poetry as to its profound wisdom and sincerity. To the disoriented mind his message rings out loud and clear; to the despondent spirit his influence is uplifting; to the tortured soul he restores peace. "We see

in him a freer, purer development of whatever is noblest in ourselves." (Thomas Carlyle -- Essay on Burns)

As much impressed by his nobility of character as I was fascinated by the natural beauty of his poetry, I started translating, four years ago, a very modest collection of his best known writings. The gratification I had was so overwhelming that I conceived of expanding the range of the undertaking to cover the poet's entire works. Turning then in all their subtle beauty from a language long gone out of use into one that is not my own was a challenge before which I would have cringed, had I not been urged on by a compelling fervour that all but blinded me to my slender ability. In the ensuing years, exhilaration alternated with perplexed despair. What promised to be rewarding toil too often turned out to be a far cry from the poet's highly idiosyncratic style, and what was produced with painstaking fidelity (in a straitjacket, as it were) all but stifled the breath of his poetry. As neither form nor substance could be sacrificed without wreaking havoc on the simple perfection of the poet's idiom, the

English rendition had to strike a careful balance, involving no end of compromise. My painful and often ill-directed efforts at reducing the disparity between the two cultures in question and, in particular, between their modes of thought and expression, eventually resulted in the present line by line translation.

In a few cases, the syntactic sequence of a couplet has been reversed in favour of greater coherence in the English version; and where a turn of speech, an image or a symbol (white, not black, for instance, is the colour of mourning) would call up associations in the English reader contrary to what they are meant to evoke, I have replaced them with their appropriate English counterparts. Where I have allowed myself greater latitude of expression, a more literal alternative is usually provided in the form of a footnote. By the same token, a turn or an image vital to the poetic message is mostly literally rendered, accompanied by a more literary version of the same. To facilitate a fuller appreciation of poetry fifteen hundred years old, I found it important to present it in the cultural context of its time.

the allusions and references with which some of the poems are heavily loaded, have been given adequate attention in annotations and explanatory notes so as to enable the English reader to see the relevant information in historical perspective. This is the sole justification for the immoderate use of notes and comments, for which I have heavily relied on the scholarship of commentators past and present. Moreover, I have carried my research a long way beyond the scope annotations for the Chinese readership would call for. Much of the material is first-hand data gathered from their sources in the ancient classics. Wherever divergence of opinion on crucial issues has occurred among commentators, this is brought to the reader's notice. For the chronology of the poet's works, I have adhered to the one worked out by the late Professor Wang Li, except for the poems Naming My Son, and Reflections on Unfortunate Scholars, where I have been otherwise convinced. Biographical details are interspersed with the great number of footnotes and comments, and should furnish adequate information about the poet's life, if read in the chronological order. In sum, the ultimate

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goal of this work is to present not only the poet but, along with him, the culture and national idiom that nurtured his poetic genius.

The translation of Tao Yuanming's works took a little over three years to accomplish. Now that it has been brought to a close, I am more than ever aware of its limitations and have at long last come to terms with the impossibility (for me at least) of rendering his complete works intact into the English language. Nonetheless, I have the satisfaction to know that I have done my bit -- efforts that might eventually add to promoting Tao Yuanming's poetry beyond the threshold of his native country. I should consider myself abundantly rewarded if here and there a couplet or two of my translation could strike a sympathetic chord in the hearts of my English readers.

As I look back on the dark hours of frustration I had experienced while grinding away at my work, I am filled with intense gratitude for the warm encouragement I received from my friends Professor Alec M. Hardie and Professor Dai Liuling. Professor Hardie's cordial reception of my earlier translation and his kind and favourable review, before his re

to England, of my selected translations inclined me in favour of embarking on the far more ambitious project of translating the poet's complete works.

To Professor Dai I am heavily indebted for his painstaking collation and candid criticism of some of the earlier as well as several of the later translations I sent him. I owe him special gratitude for the approach I took to solving the classic dilemma of freedom versus constraint confronting all translators of poetry.

I deeply appreciate the genuine interest my friends and colleagues Professor Wang Yue, Mr. M. Jack Leamy, Professor Yang Tiantang, Professor He Guozhi, Dr. Anne Tessenzen, Mr. Huang Hanping, Professor Zhang Luanling and Dr. Katya Walter (being the last to come, she is the only person to have read the manuscript in its final, complete state) had taken in my work and gratefully acknowledge their helpful suggestions. My sincere acknowledgment is due to the gentlemen of the University's Office for the Advancement of Research, with whose friendly assistance the appended typescript of the original poems has been brought about. To Miss Weng Ziqi I am much obliged

for the English typescript, especially for kindly putting up with the endless revisions and last minute alterations I felt bound to make.

In whatever form these translations might one day appear, to the memory of my mother, to my wife, and to a very dear old friend I dedicate this modest offering of love's labour.

Tan Shilin

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