

*Kwong*

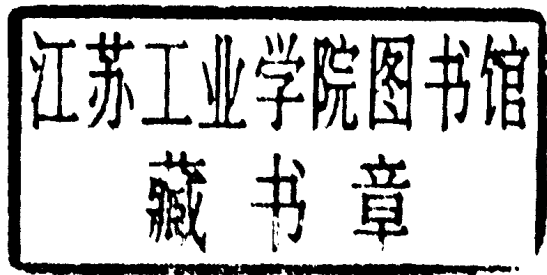
**Tao Qian and the Chinese Poetic Tradition**

# Tao Qian and the Chinese Poetic Tradition

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*The Quest for Cultural Identity*

*Charles Yim-tze Kwong*



*Center for Chinese Studies  
The University of Michigan*

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Tao Qian" (1989) and "The Rural World of Chinese 'Farmstead Poetry' (*Tianyuan Shi*): How Far Is It Pastoral?" (1993). In addition, I wish to thank Tufts University for a summer faculty fellowship and two research awards, and the National Endowment for the Humanities for a summer stipend, all of which have facilitated the completion of this book.

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## Abbreviations

Works most frequently cited have been abbreviated according to the list below:

- A*      *Lunyu* [yizhu] 論語[譯注] (*Analects of Confucius*). trans. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻. Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1984.
- D*      *Tao Yuan-ming: His Works and Their Meaning*, 2 vols. Davis, A. R. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983.
- H*      *Tao Yuanming yanjiu ziliao huibian* 陶淵明研究資料彙編, 2 vols. ed. Dept of Chinese, Beijing Univ. and Beijing Teachers' Univ. 北京大學北京師範大學中文系, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962.
- HS*     *Han shu* 漢書, 12 vols. Ban Gu 班固. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962.
- HT*     *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien*. Hightower, James R. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970.
- JS*     *Jin shu* 晉書, 10 vols. Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 et al. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974.
- L*      *Laozi* [jiaoshi] 老子[校釋]. ed. Zhu Qianzhi 朱謙之. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984.
- M*      *Mengzi* [yizhu] 孟子[譯注], 2 vols. trans. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960.

- Mn *Doctrine of the Mean* (Zhong Yong 中庸). In Zhu Xi 朱熹, ed. *Sishu* [zhangju jizhu] 四書[章句集注]. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983.
- QTS *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, 25 vols. ed. Peng Dingqiu 彭定求 et al. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960.
- SJ *Shi ji* 史記, 10 vols. Sima Qian 司馬遷. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982.
- SP *Shipin* [zhu] 詩品[注]. Zhong Hong 鐘嶸. ed. Chen Yanjie 陳延傑. Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1980.
- SS *Song shu* 宋書, 8 vols. Shen Yue 沈約. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974.
- SX *Shishuo xinyu* [jiaojian] 世說新語[校箋]. Liu Yiqing 劉義慶. ed. Yang Yong 楊勇. Hong Kong: Dazhong shuju, 1969.
- TYJ *Tao Yuanming ji* 陶淵明集. ed. Lu Qinli 逯欽立. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979.
- WD *Wenxin diaolong* [yizhu] 文心雕龍[譯注], 2 vols. Liu Xie 劉勰. trans. Lu Kanru 陸侃如 and Mou Shijin 牟世金. Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1982.
- X *Xunzi* [jijie] 荀子[集解], 2 vols. ed. Wang Xianqian 王先謙. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988. Numerals refer to chapter and line numbers as printed in the Harvard-Yenching concordance.
- XLJ *Xie Lingyun ji* [jiaozhu] 謝靈運集[校注]. ed. Gu Shaobai 顧紹柏. Henan: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1987.
- XQH *XianQin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩, 3 vols. ed. Lu Qinli 逯欽立. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983.
- Z *Zhuangzi* 莊子. Numerals refer to chapter and line numbers as printed in the Harvard-Yenching concordance.
- ZJ *Zhuangzi* [jishi] 莊子[集釋], 4 vols. ed. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961.

## *Contents*

Acknowledgments *vii*

List of Abbreviations *ix*

Introduction 1

### **Part I: The Poet within the Wei-Jin Ethos and Classical Ideals**

- 1 The Spirit of the Age 9
- 2 The Dilemma of Engagement or Reclusion 21
- 3 Peach Blossom Spring and Visions of Utopia 51
- 4 Mortality and the Meaning of Life 63

### **Part II: Tao Qian's Poetic Art**

- 5 Spontaneous Symbolism and Visionary Realism 77
- 6 Philosophical Poetry and "Abstruse-Language Verse" 117
- 7 "Farmstead Poetry" and the Western Pastoral 133
- 8 Crystallinity of Language and Style 147
- 9 Neo-Daoist Aesthetics and the Art of Nature 167
- 10 Luminosity of the Unconscious: The Ineffable Truth 183



*vi Tao Qian and the Chinese Poetic Tradition*

11	Art as Embodiment of Life: Naturalness and Truthfulness	195
----	---	-----

	Epilogue: A Destiny between Fate, Nature, and Heaven's Decree	201
--	---	-----

	Notes	209
--	-------	-----

	Selected Bibliography	247
--	-----------------------	-----

	Glossary	267
--	----------	-----

	Index	273
--	-------	-----

# *Introduction*

Poetry is art embedded in history and culture. While the immediate focus of this book is on Tao Qian (365–427),<sup>1</sup> the poet's writings are placed within literary, intellectual, and socio-political contexts developed over the preceding two centuries, and related to longstanding philosophical and aesthetic ideals from the pre-Qin period. Comparisons are drawn from the Western literary tradition as occasion arises, with the mindfulness that perspectives independently formed in China and the West cannot be facilely transferred from one to the other. Relating close reading to wider cultural-historical factors and to cross-cultural literary phenomena, the study attempts an integral interpretive approach.

My discussion consists of two main parts. Part I moves from an overview of the Wei-Jin (220–420) ethos to Tao's lifelong quest for a personal and cultural identity; the complex artistic world revealed in his work reflects a dialectic search for a social and natural ideal informed by Daoism and Confucianism. More importantly, these visions constitute both a thematic macrostructure and a stylistic underpinning of his art. Analysis in Part II of its main aspects and its variations in tone, rhythm, and language to express different experiences shows Tao's art to be in essential unity with his life and ideals. Indeed the artistic process, in crystallizing a poetry of naturalness and simplicity, becomes a symbolic parallel to the poet's existential quest.

## 2 *Tao Qian and the Chinese Poetic Tradition*

A number of authors, forms, and literary trends are introduced in a series of comparisons that highlight the artistic, historical, and cultural distinction of Tao's poetry in the Chinese lyric tradition.

To interpret Tao's poetry is also to discuss his life and poetic personality, first because they are so interfused with his work that a sense of them, as constituted from his writings, will in turn shed light on individual texts. Moreover, such a sense also enhances interpretive validity in being part of a wider evidential framework that may be the best antidote to selective reading based on a small number of texts and loaded theoretical premises. Third, Tao's life and identity form part of his poetic legacy that is revitalized by successive generations of readers, and that became a source of artistic inspiration to later poets as they tried to emulate him. No doubt the relationship between an author's work and life is no simple determinate question, not least because that life includes things he did *not* do: apart from empirical experience, the creative process is sparked yet not totally dictated by his conscious and unconscious intentions and impulses, nor does the import of the resultant work correspond exactly with them. Still, in both conception and praxis, much of Chinese lyricism remains an expressive record of thoughts, feelings, and life experiences. In Tao's work such autobiography is approximate because much of his known identity comes from his work; incomplete since it gives no comprehensive account of his life; and poetic in that pieces based on life experiences are blended with expressions and compositions of imaginative idealism, which may be fictional to the critic but are a real and deeply felt part of the poet's life, and so must be included in an extended sense of the autobiographical. Now fictional elements in poetic autobiography may point to a number of meanings and functions; suffice it to say that their presence does not always mean self-conscious role-playing or defensive image-building—just as such attempts do not always involve fictional fabrication. Indeed, while the postulation of self-image construction implies an act of manipulation and distortion and ultimately a certain authorial insincerity, the possibility is always there—especially if the poet's sensibility is of a visionary or idealistic cast—that the empirically fictional

elements in his work may be experientially and expressively authentic. From recognizing the autobiographical nature of Tao's work, it does not follow that he is consciously engaged in a sustained attempt to write his autobiography. Only textual evidence will determine whether a particular poet writes first to express his sentiments,<sup>2</sup> or to promote himself to his readers.

The question of lyric authenticity is one of several wider issues, illustrated by Tao's poetry and partly indicated by the chapter headings, interwoven into this study. More generally, my discussion is predicated on the belief that literature is best appreciated not as an autonomous verbal entity but as the fruit of a temporal, cultural activity. Indeed, as the crystallization of a personal vision founded on cultural ideals, of a writer's sentiments (private and public) and experience in his encounter with history, great literature becomes fully intelligible only in light of the larger values, institutions, and personal and historical circumstances in which it is embedded. Since writers are situated within a literary and cultural tradition, the spirit and taste of the age as well as a web of historical conditions, there can be no rigid distinction between what lies within and outside a text, but rather a mutualistic relation between cultural-historical study and formal analysis. A full contextualization of the text beyond its formal boundaries—synchronically and diachronically—will enable it to be understood in a more meaningful and aesthetically profound way, one that is true to the irreducible complexity of history and culture itself.

To recognize the necessity of cultural-historical understanding for literary interpretation is not to see the relationship between them as a simple one. For a text far removed in time, any historical context supplied is but approximate, for the factors constituting it—material and nonmaterial, coeval and past, personal or otherwise—cannot be recovered in totality. Moreover, there are always specific traits about the spirit of a writer's age that are superimposed on the more permanent, deep-seated elements of the culture's value system, so that the dynamic between them must be carefully examined. Above all, no context can be rigidly determinative of textual meaning, for no

#### 4 *Tao Qian and the Chinese Poetic Tradition*

cultural-historical activity needs to be confined within the orientations directing the culture of a given period. The author's response to historical realities is both individual and mediated by contemporary and time-honored ideas, just as his understanding of these ideas is filtered through his own and the larger historical situation. No neutral transmitters but renovators of culture, great artists do not just affirm but extend cultural boundaries by testing them against the contingencies of history. To the extent that great literary works always reinterpret inherited principles and standards which may be paradoxical and conflicting themselves, the understanding of history and culture is partly dependent on the literary work. Establishing the links and roots of a text cannot substitute for close reading, because a text is cultural not so much by reference to the world beyond as by virtue of what it has internalized and renewed.

Yet while falling short of completeness and total objectivity, the contextual restitution need not be arbitrary. Since interpretation begins and ends with the text, one can start with information it contains—quotations, topical references, language recalling prior usage or shared by contemporary discourse. Guiding literary and philosophical orientations within the cultural framework should be heeded, and spiritual values infusing the lyric impulse as heartfelt sentiments and lived experience elucidated. In the case of Tao, my study shows how his cultural heritage of interlocking and sometimes conflicting value-orientations generates a spiritual-aesthetic order along with a set of models and imperatives that are tested against a shattering reality. As with all great artists, his poetic sensibility and technique are not confined by the period ethos and trends in which he existed. Writing becomes a way of negotiating experience as he interacts with his cultural matrix; and in the living continuity between the venerable past and the afflicting present, the dynamic between the contingencies of history and the search for lasting truth, is to be found the individual vitality of Tao's poetry that cannot be explained in purely formalistic terms.

• Lyric poetry is primarily expressive rather than didactic. In the work of an idealist like Tao, though, one finds ample support for the

ancient Chinese perception of the cultural function of literature whose embodiment of values and ideals gives it a heuristic resonance beyond "artistic" bounds. While not as emphatic about this function as Spenser, when he declares the purpose of *The Faerie Queene* as one of "fashion[ing] a gentleman or noble person," Tao surely sees art in a similar light when he writes "If I do not transmit [the Way as Confucius did], how will later generations hear about it?" (TYJ 106). The perception and reception of a poet's work can thus become testimony to its cultural significance. Largely ignored for three centuries by a readership of different tastes, Tao's poetry transcends and perpetuates its historicity by being constantly revitalized in subsequent periods. But its elevation from neglect to eventual canonicity represents more than a reversal of collective critical verdict: underlying the stabilized judgment of posterity are values and ideals which also help insure the poetry's continual capacity to invigorate the culture that fostered it. At least since Song (960–1279) times, Tao's poetry has remained living testimony to Daoist and Confucian visions of existence that have always spurred literati with a higher sense of ideal; as a reservoir of images, archetypes, and topoi repeatedly invoked and applied to new situations; and as a stylistic and generic touchstone by which to measure works it inspired. The function of literature as a cultural conveyor is especially clear from the often aesthetic-cum-spiritual response of later readers to Tao's poetry, since the artistic ideal and model of wisdom it exemplifies are essentially similar. In this light, our appreciation of the total significance of Tao's art does depend on our understanding of the poet's entire culture.

In sum, this book attempts to show how the study of literature, history, and ideas can be integrated to yield a sense of the complex whole of both literature and culture. Beyond its immediate task of appraising Tao's art, the discussion offers a glimpse of what may be called the quintessential spirit of the Chinese poet, one that continues to imbue the ways in which he envisions the world, the goals of existence he strives to enact, and the aesthetic ideals he tries to attain. A full substantiation of this proposition calls for more evidence than

## 6 *Tao Qian and the Chinese Poetic Tradition*

the present study can offer, but Tao's embodiment of this spirit certainly points the way in which many larger literary questions may be considered. To the poet's existential and artistic quest we shall now turn.

# I

## *The Poet within the Wei-Jin Ethos and Classical Ideals*



