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THE TAOIST VISION.

A STUDY OF T'AO YUAN-MING'S NATURE POETRY

In the intellectual history of China, two philosophical schools, Taoism and Confucianism, predominated up to the twentieth century. Although these two rival philosophies contended for supremacy, each served, jointly or separately, as a basic mode of Chinese thinking, which would in turn form the infra- and supra-structures of traditional Chinese society. Though divergent in their approach and methods of application, the followers of both Confucius and Lao Tzu^a set as their ultimate goal the attainment of the *Tao*,^b an elusive term that defies exact translation. "The *Tao* that can be defined is not the eternal *Tao*," warned Lao Tzu, the acknowledged founder of Taoism.¹ For practical purposes the word is usually translated as "the way," "the path," or "the road." By extension, it has come to mean the norm (in the Platonic sense), the moral principles, Truth, or Nature. To Confucianists, the *Tao* stands for an abstract principle in the realm of ethics, applicable to human behavior and human relationships. More concretely stated, a man can become an ideal moral being, if the moral law is implemented by education and by adherence to a set structure of duties, rites, and observances. The Taoist, on the other hand, believes that man's spirit is free and that it must be allowed to grow and expand spontaneously, to live in harmony with nature where all things are equal. In the Taoist view, to cultivate goodness in man through academic learning and socially imposed rules and conventions is to restrict him to superficial human values, which are material and temporal, and to strip him of his primordial purity and simplicity.

The earliest literature on the *Tao* is the *Lao-tzu*,^c traditionally attributed to Lao Tzu, a semi-legendary figure supposed to be a contemporary of Confucius (551-479 B.C.). Although highly cryptic, it remains the uncontested authority for orthodox Taoist philosophy. The second most important of the Taoist writings is the *Chuang-tzu*,^d named after

the honorific title of its author, Chuang Chou^{e,2} According to Arthur Waley, in his *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*, Chuang Tzu "can be understood by anyone who knows how to read poetry."³ Indeed, the *Chuang-tzu* is read today more for its literary qualities than for its metaphysics, because it is highly imaginative, and full of rich symbols, imagery, and paradox.

What little we know of Chuang Tzu is found in the *Shih-chi*^f (*Historical Records*) of Szu-ma Ch'ien,^g from which we learn that he was a native of Sung,^h born during the last part of the fourth century B.C. and thus a contemporary of Mencius.⁴ Even though he was sought by the rulers of Ch'i¹ and Ch'uj to assist them in governing, he never served them in any official capacity. He spent his time in teaching and writing, content to live poor but independent. Chuang Tzu's philosophy has had little impact on the social and political systems of China, but his influence on Chinese literature, especially on nature poetry, has been immeasurable. In the introduction to his translation of Chinese poetry, *Images of Jade*, Arthur Christy observes:

Nature, the universe, is the Chinese poet's field. Here he exercises the widest liberty in indulging his passion for the things which please his fancy. And what he produces is not primitive or elemental in feeling, nor is it a mere enjoyment of the sensuous. If a comparison may be permitted, he is more Wordsworthian than Keatsian. His poetry is a chastened and subdued product of reflection, for he regards Nature not merely as a physical phenomenon, with sensuously enjoyable qualities, but as animating soul which is in intimate relation with life itself. For him spirit interprets matter. He is a thorough-going mystic. He is not satisfied merely with a faithful representation or presentation in his art of what he sees and feels, although he does this extremely well. His desire is to render Nature's more subtle and essential aspects, for in them he believes he finds the way towards an appreciation of the Law of our being and the universe as a whole.⁵

Among the numerous nature poets in China, T'ao Yuan-ming,^k also known as T'ao Ch'i'en (365-427 A.D.)⁶ comes closest to the above description. The earliest recognized and the most admired of all Chinese nature poets, T'ao Yuan-ming also has a great affinity with the English Romantic poet, Wordsworth (1770-1850). Granted that the two are separated by time and space, and are products of their own environments and their own philosophical traditions, their poetic inspirations, however, seem to have been derived from the same source: Nature. And nature plays a major role in both their lives and their poetry.

Wordsworth's concept of nature can be traced to Rousseau's idea of primitivism, with the elevation of the "Noble Savage" and the belief that man's heart and actions are basically good, until he is tainted or corrupted by civilization, which then causes him to become crafty and devious through imitation or education. T'ao Yuan-ming perceives nature through the vision embodied in *Lao-tzu* and *Chuang-tzu*, in which nature is equated to the primordial power of creation. If anything, it is close to the *Natura Naturans* of Spinoza, who, also believes that all things are determined in Nature, which he conceives to be infinite and unified. "Instead of maintaining that God is like man magnified to infinity, who has absolute, irresponsible control of a universe which is external to him," observes Joseph Ratner, author of *The Introduction to the Philosophy of Spinoza*, "Spinoza maintains that God is identical with the universe and must be and act according to eternal and necessary laws."⁷ In this sense, Spinoza is also a Taoist at heart in observing that God is Nature, or that God, Nature or substance is one. For in the final analysis, Spinoza's *Natura Naturans* and *Natura Naturata* are ultimately one.⁸ But Chuang Tzu seems to go one step further when he implies that man's freedom can be gained only by transcending one's self and by becoming one with Nature as he voices in the following paradox: "The perfect man has no self; the holy man has no merit; the Sage has no fame."⁹ It was in pursuit of this kind of vision that T'ao Yuan-ming renounced public life and returned to his farm, that is, to nature. The "return to nature" served as a turning point in T'ao Yuan-ming's life and in his poetry. He wrote several poems to justify, exalt, and commemorate the occasion, which possibly happened in 405 A.D. In the first section of a long poem entitled "Returning to

My Farm," he confesses:

In my youth I was out of tune with the world of man.
My nature inclined me to mountains and streams.
By mistake I fell into the web of the dusty world,
And thirty years of my life have been wasted.

The captive bird longs for its home in the grove;
The fish in the tank craves for its former abode.
So I have cleaned up the wilderness south of the village;
Remaining rustic, I have returned to my farms.

.....
.....

Elms and willows lend shades to my rear eaves;
Peach and plum trees decorate my front hall.
Distance blurs the village from sight,
Wrapt in mist and smoke rising from the chimneys.
Dogs bark in the narrow lanes;
Cocks crow atop the mulberry trees.
No dust or turmoil in this homestead;
Plenty of freedom in the unadorned rooms.
Long, long was I confined in a cage;
Now I have returned to nature once more.¹⁰

The same return-to-nature theme is further repeated in a fu,^m a prose poem bearing a similar title, "Returning Home" ("Kuei-ch'iu lai-hsil¹"), which is prefaced by an introductory note that reads in part:

I was poor, and what I got from farming was not enough to support my family. The house was full of children, the rice jar was empty, and I could not see any way to supply the necessities of life. . . . P'eng-tse^o was only thirty miles from my native place, and the yield of the fields assigned the magistrate was sufficient to keep me in wine, so I applied for the office. Before many days had passed, I longed to give up and go back

home. Why, you may ask. Because my instinct is all for freedom, and will not brook discipline and restraint. Hunger and cold may be sharp, but this going against myself really sickens me_ Whenever I have been involved in official life I was mortgaging myself to my mouth and belly and the realization of this greatly upset me.... 11'

The ensuing long poem in sixty lines of irregular meter that follows expresses the poet's elation and irrepressible joy at the free, rustic, and simple life after the return:

Every day I stroll in the garden for pleasure,
There is a gate there, but it is always shut.
Cane in hand I walk and rest
Occasionally raising my head to gaze into the distance.
The clouds aimlessly rise from the peaks,
The birds, weary of flying, know it is time to come home.
As the sun's rays grow dim and disappear from view
I walk around a lonely pine tree, stroking it.

Back home again!

May my friendships be broken off and my wandering come to an end.

The world and I shall have nothing more to do with one another.

. . . I admire the seasonableness of nature
And am moved to think that my life will come to its close.

I have no desire for riches

And no expectation of Heaven.
 Rather on some fine morning to walk alone
 Now planting my staff to take up a hoe,
 Or climbing the east hill and whistling long
 Or composing verses besides the clear stream:
 So I manage to accept my lot until the ultimate homecoming.
 Rajoicing in Heaven's command, what is there to doubt?12

Although T'ao Yuan-ruing tells us that he is fond of nature by inclination, we sense that his joy in nature is heightened after his disillusionment with public life during a period when China was occupied by alien tribes in the north and was rift apart by the civil strife and political corruption of the government in the south. Coincidentally, Wordsworth, too, took refuge in nature and chose the life of a recluse at Dove Cottage, Grasmere, after he became disillusioned with the French Revolution. His long, autobiographical poem entitled "The Prelude" (written between 1798 and 1805, but not published until his death in 1850) remotely echoes the sentiments of the fifth-century Chinese poet in these lines:

Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze,
 A visitant that while it fans my cheek
 Doth seem half-conscious of the joy it brings
 From the green fields, and from yon azure sky.
 Whate'er its mission, the soft breeze can come
 To none more grateful than to me; escaped
 From the vast city, where I long had pined
 A discontented sojourner: now free,
 Free as a bird to settle where I will.°

Note also how similar in feeling and tone with T'ao Yuan-ming is Wordsworth's poem, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey":

..... Once again
 Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs
 That on a wild secluded scene impress

Though of more deep seclusion; and connect
 The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
 The day is come when I again repose
 Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
 Those plots of cottage-grounds, these orchard-tufts.
 Which at this season, with their upripe fruits,
 Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
 `Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
 These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
 Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
 Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
 Sent up, in silence, from among the trees.14

The landscapes of the nineteenth-century English countryside could not possibly have been identical with the countryside of fifth century China, but one cannot fail to see the similarities in description, in the exuberance that both poets derive from their respective natural elements. Further on in the same poem, Wordsworth grows into a more reflective mood and rises to a more elevated thought, which could well have been that of the Chinese poet:

.... For I have learned
 To look on nature, not as in the hour
 Of thoughtless youth; but hearing often times
 The still, sad music of humanity,
 Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
 To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
 A motion and a spirit, that impels
 All thinking things, and objects of all thought,

And rolls through all things

In nature and the language of the sense
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my mortal being.¹⁵

Although less explicit and low-key in expression, no Yuan-ming finds both pleasure and sustenance in the nature that surrounds him in all seasons, whether he is well provided for or destitute. In the two poems written in response to Secretary Kuo, a former colleague of the poet, who might earlier have questioned T'ao Yuan-ming's wisdom in choosing early retirement from public life, or sympathized with his present humble condition (we have no way of determining which, since we do not have Kuo's writing), T'ao Yuan-ming describes the rather cheerful condition of his rustic life:

(1)

Luxuriant are the trees in front of the hall;
 In mid-summer they offer cool shade.
 The seasonal south wind arrives on time.
 How refreshing it blows through my open lapel.
 In retirement I am engaged only in leisure:
 I amuse myself with books and music, free to rise or to rest.

My vegetable garden yields plenty for the table;
 The rice bin still contains last year's grain.
 There is a limit to what one needs;
 Havin^g more ^than enough is not my plan.
 With sorghum I have made wine in spring.
 Now that it is ripe, I pour myself a cup or two.
 My little child frolicking by my side
 Is trying to make intelligible sound.

In all these I have found genuine delight
 Which helps me to forget honor and rank.
 As I gaze at the white clouds in the distance,
 The ancients are deep in my thoughts.

Mild and moist were the months of spring;
 Cool and clear is the white season of autumn.
 Now the dew congeals, no longer drifting mists.
 The sky *is* high, the landscape sharp and clear.
 Soaring peaks rise from yonder mountain range—
 Seen from here, their lofty beauty is unsurpassed.
 Fragrant chrysanthemums deck the woods with splendor;
 The green pines stand in rows above the cliff.
 I admire their beauteous grandeur,
 Elegant and lofty under the frost.
 Holding my wine cup, I toast to the mystics
 Who once roamed along the pines.
 Searching for the essence I have not yet acquired,
 Reluctantly I await the rising moon.¹⁶

Granted, these poems are replete with ambiguous symbols not easily grasped, and thus lend themselves to various interpretations; however, the general tenor and intention of the poems are quite clear. While the conventional symbols of chrysanthemums and pines could very well stand for the poet's personal integrity and endurance, it seems unlikely that these poems stress T'ao's own moral values. This can be substantiated by the poet's allusion to the "ancients" in the last line of the first verse, and to the "mystics" in the second verse. Both seem to refer to the same "ancients" mentioned in the following passage of *Chuang-tzu*:

The understanding of the men of ancient times went a long way. How far did it go? To the point where some, of them believed that things have never existed — so *far*, to the end, where nothing can be added. Those at the next stage thought

there were boundaries but recognized no right or wrong. Because right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured, and because the Way was injured, love became complete. But do such things as completion and injury really exist or do they not? ¹⁷

Only in this context do the last two lines, which defy the interpretation of many critics, make sense. It has often been said that T'ao Yuan-ming's poetic language, unlike that of his contemporaries, is simple and unadorned. This does not mean that he is incapable of expressing profound thought. However, when his thought verges on mysticism, or his idea grows out of his Taoist vision, words are inadequate for the full expression of the concept. The reader can either confute himself to appreciating the surface meaning of the poem or he can attempt to read between the lines, and try to grasp its meaning through his intuitive power. The following poem is a good example of the intrinsic complexity of Tao's thought behind his deceptively simple expressions:

I have built my cottage amid the realm of men
 But I hear no din of horses or carriages.
 You might ask, "How is this possible?"
 A remote heart creates its own hermitage!
 Picking chrysanthemums by the eastern hedge,
 I perceive the Southern Mountain in the distance.
 Marvelous is the mountain air at sunset!
 The flitting birds return home in pairs.
 In these things is the essence of truth —
 I wish to explain but have lost the words. ¹⁸

The concrete imagery and the realistic description in these lines seem to have such a strong impact on the reader, that he may feel transported from a mundane world into a rare world of beauty and tranquility, momentarily sharing and experiencing the poet's vision. The juxtaposition of the Southern Mountain (a symbol of immutability) and the chrysanthemums (a symbol of impermanence but recurrence) could,

by their contrasting yet harmonious presence, lift the reader out of the existential level to a metaphysical plane of perception approaching to a universal harmony, or an infusion between subject and object. At the same time, one is kept in touch with the reality of the present — heightened by the feel of the mountain air and the sight of the birds flying home at sunset. If this is a subjective and perhaps limited response to the poem, it is because one can hardly find adequate words to explain the full import of that which the poet himself has left unexplained because words have failed him. The last line of this poem in particular is reminiscent of the first line in chapter one of *Lao-tzu* which says: "The *Tao* that can be explained is not the eternal *Tao* [or Truth] ." ¹⁹ However, if one can grasp the Truth through one's intuitive power, there is indeed no need for words, as *Chuang-tzu* explains:

The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you've gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of the meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?"

Could the truth that T'ao Yuan-ming tries to convey in his poem be inherent in the innocence and glory of "the new-born blessed" that Wordsworth writes about in Stanza VIII of his "Intimations of Immortality":

Thou, whose exterior semblance does belie the Soul's
 immensity;
 Thou best philosopher, who yet dost keep
 Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
 That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
 Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,
 Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
 On whom those truth do rest,
 Which we are toiling all our lives to find

Unlike Wordsworth, T'ao Yuan-ming did not seem to have to "toil" to find the truth, or the *Tao*, in his life. He simply lived it, by returning to Nature. Since his resignation from public service, and his rejection of those social values which tied him down, the poet was able to "return home" to his natural habitat, free from all outside pressures or the need to conform, free to follow the dictates of his own nature. He was content even in adversity with the life he chose to live. Although he experienced hunger and cold, as he stated in several poems, even to the point of begging for food, as attested to by his poem "Ch'i-shih" ("Begging | he never complained and never lost heart. But he did not choose the deliberate asceticism practiced by certain Taoist and Buddhist religious sects. He never denied himself the pleasures of wine whenever he could afford it, he enjoyed family life and the company of his rustic friends and neighbors.

Two-thirds of T'ao Yuan-ming's extant poems were written after his resignation from the office of P'eng-tse magistrate. They are a record of his life as a farmer, eking out his livelihood from the soil. This is where he and Wordsworth part company, because Wordsworth wrote about the humble subject and the rustic, and the hard life of "Michael" or the "LeechGatherer" purely from a spectator's point of view; T'ao Yuan-ming left us with his first-hand experiences and a record of his innermost thoughts and feelings. Occasionally, T'ao Yuan-ming brooded upon such ontological questions as life and death. One representative poem of his philosophical reflections is "Hsing, Ying, Shen"^P (variously translated as "Substance, Shadow and Spirit," or "Body, Shadow, and Soul"). Of this poem, A. R. Davis comments:

This poem stands out in T'ao's collection as a deliberately "philosophical" poem. Similar ideas can be found incidentally in other of his poems, but here alone in his surviving work are they developed to the point of dialectical treatment, The piece, however, remains a poem, a fine poem; it is not a philosophical essay. It has, therefore, the obliqueness of reference, natural to poetry and the poet's mind. Although there is in the few words of the preface a slight suggestion of polemic,

the expression is strongly personal, and I think that it is wrong to regard it too much as a document in contemporary intellectual controversy ... 23

In a head-note to his poem, Tao Yuan-ming gives the following explanation: "Every one, noble or base, brilliant or dumb, clings tenaciously to *life*, which is nothing but a delusion. Therefore, I have given voice to Substance and Shadow to express their grief, and let the Soul or Spirit resolve their problems by following the course of Nature. Those who are concerned with this matter understand my intention.""

The poet's intention seems to present at first three different points of view regarding human life and mortality. The source of T'ao

"Once a man receives this fixed bodily form, he holds onto it, waiting for the end. Sometimes clashing with

stead, and nothing can stop him. Is he not pathetic?"²⁵

Further on, in the same book one reads:

Do not be an embodier of fame; do not be a storehouse of schemes;...do not be a possessor of wisdom... Hold on to all that you have received Heaven (i.e. Nature) but do not think that you have gotten anything. Be empty, that is all.²⁶

T'ao Yuan-ming, in this poem, makes Substance speak for the hedonistic *carpe deim* concept of indulging in wine, since there is nothing for him to look forward to. He does not believe in the attainment of immortality as do some of the Taoists of the esoteric religious cults, nor does he believe in the transcendency of inevitable change as preached by the Buddhists of his time. The Shadow represents the transitory glory of name and fame or moral virtues from the humanist perspective adhered to by most Confucians. T'ao Yuan-ming's own philosophy, represented by the Spirit, is that man should follow the course of Nature, which is the

essence of *Tao*. The poem, quoted here in full, is one of the most revealing texts of the poet's philosophical bent:

Substance, Shadow, and Spirit

(I)

Shadow to Substance

Earth and heaven endure forever,
Streams and mountains never change.
Plants observe a constant rhythm,
Withered by frost, by dew restored.
But man, most sentient being of all,
In this is not their equal.

He is present here in the world today.

Then leaves abruptly, to return no more.
No one marks there's one man less —
Not even friends and family think of him;
The things that he once used are all that's left
To catch their eye and move them to grief.
I have no way to transcend change,
That it must be, I no longer doubt.
I hope you will take my advice:
When wine is offered, don't refuse.

(H)

Shadow to Substance

No use discussing immortality
When just to keep alive is hard enough.
Of course I want to roam in paradise,
But it's a long way there and the road is lost.
In all the time since I met up with you
We never differed in our grief and joy.
In shade we may have parted for a time,
But sunshine always brings us close again.

Still this union cannot last forever —
Together we will vanish into darkness.
The body goes; that fame should also end
Is a thought that makes me burn inside.
Do good, and your love will outlive you;
Surely this is worth your every effort.
While it is time, wine may dissolve care
That is not so good a way as this.

(HIY)

Spirit's Solution

The Great Potter cannot intervene —
All creation thrives of itself.
That Man ranks with Earth and Heaven,
Is it not because of me?
Though we belong to different orders,
Being alive, I am joined to you.
Bound together for good or ill
I cannot refuse to tell you what I know:
The Three August Ones were great saints
But where are they living today?
Though P'eng-tsu lasted a long time.
He still had to go before he was ready.
Die old or die young, death is the same,
Wise or stupid, there is no difference.
Drunk every day you may forget,
But won't it shorten your life span?
Doing good is always a joyous thing
But no one has to praise you for it.
Too much thinking harms my life;
Just surrender to the cycle of things,
Give yourself to the waves of the Great Change
Neither happy nor yet afraid.
And when it is time to go, then simply go
Without any unnecessary fuss."

This poem may be considered the testament of T'ao Yuan-ming's personal conviction, grown out of a long process of deliberation. Nowhere else in the poet's writing is his philosophical contemplation as succinctly enounced. Undoubtedly, like many of his contemporaries, T'ao Yuan-ming had felt the impact of sundry religious practices such as Buddhism and esoteric Taoism, in addition to orthodox Confucianism and philosophical Taoism. If he had not been tempted by the popular practices of one school or another, he must have been familiar with their beliefs. He never succumbed to the pursuit of sensuous pleasures (even though he enjoyed the pleasure of wine); joined any esoteric cult promoting the prolongation of life; nor tried to preserve his name and fame after death. Instead, T'ao Yuan-ming, represented by the Spirit in his poems, surrendered himself to the course of Nature, and thus freed himself from all worries and the fear of death.

Throughout Chinese literary history, however, critics have disagreed about T'ao Yuan-ming's philosophical leanings because of the lack of any detailed, accurate biographies of the poet. In all three dynastic histories, his biographies are placed in the category of "Recluses."²⁸ Moreover, they are all brief, sketchy, and short on facts and details. Even the dates of his birth and death are not precisely known, thus leaving room for speculation. One is informed that he was a native of Ch'ai-sang in Chiu-chiang,⁹ and that he was born into an impoverished family of the scholar-official class. His great grandfather was the illustrious T'ao K'an,[†] Duke of Ch'ang-sha; his maternal grandfather also was a high official in the Western Chin. T'ao Yuan-ming held several minor government posts before his appointment as magistrate of P'eng-tse, a position from which he resigned some eighty days later.²⁹

Some critics have pointed to the inherent conflict in T'ao Yuan-ming between his Confucian aspirations for social involvement and his personal inclination for the love of nature and freedom. Could his early Confucian training in moral integrity and personal discipline have curbed some of the negativism of his Taoist beliefs? Although he renounced political ambitions in his pursuit of the *Tao*, he did not really abandon the world of man; his models were historical personages of high moral virtue whom he wished to emulate.

T'ao Yuan-ming's view of himself as a person is best seen in his short prose piece, "Biography of Mr. Five Willows" ("Wu-liu hsien-sheng chuan"[§]), which is, by consensus, a thinly disguised self-portrait:

Mr. Five Willows is a native of one knows not where. Nor does Erie know his name. Since there are *five* willows by **his house**, he has been given the sobriquet of "Mr. Five Willows." He is *a man* of few words, retiring by nature. He has no desire for money or for fame. An avid reader, he does not however, seek extraneous interpretations. Whenever he finds certain books arresting his interest, he forgets his meals. He has a special weakness for wine, but being poor he cannot always afford **it**. **His** friends, aware of this, often invite him to drink. Then he drinks to his heart's content. But when he is drunk, he takes leave at once. The walls surrounding his house are dilapidated, giving little protection from the sun or wind. His coarse gown is shabby and threadbare; his rice jar is frequently empty. Yet he lives in contentment, and writes poetry to amuse himself and to express how he feels. Worldly gain or loss does not concern him. This is his way of life."

hi the coda of Mr. Five Willows' biography (known as *T'ao'an'* or Eulogy), and in accordance with the conventional style of Chinese biographical literature, T'ao Yuan-ming sums up his appraisal of Mr. Five Willows by way of an analogy:

When Ch'ien Lou^u said, "One does not grieve over poverty or low station in life, nor does one strive for power or riches," did he have this man (Mr. Five Willows) in mind? **He** drinks and writes poetry to please himself (unmindful of public opinion) — such a man should belong to the time of Wu-huaiv and Ko-t'ien^w (both legendary sage rulers of an ideal era of high antiquity).³¹

This indeed is high self-praise coming from a man who is both truthful

and honest. But if Mr. Five Willows was not *a* self-image of the poet, he was at least a model which he admired. That the persona in this biographical work with no known name *or* origin is nicknamed Mr. Five Willows is rather puzzling. If the nickname were meant to be merely a realistic description of T'ao Yuan-ming's own *homestead*, he could have named his fictitious character after the blue pines in his garden, or called him the Master of Chrysanthemums", which *grew along the eastern hedge*. No one seems to question the significance of the appellation, Mr. Five Willows, which posterity has assumed is *an* alias for the poet. There *seems* to be no historical antecedent for the name, but the allusion of Ch'ien Lou, whose motto was "one grieves not over poverty or low station in life, nor does he strive for power or riches," may suggest that T'ao Yuan-ming is applying to Mr. Five Willows a motto equally applicable to the poet himself.³¹ This worthy man of the Ch'un-ch'iu period, who lived and died in poverty, was posthumously named "K'ang" (translated as "contentment"), because of his moral richness. He is mentioned not only in T'ao Yuan-ming's own poems, but also appears later in the "Elegy for T'ao Yuan-ming," written by Yen Yen-chih (384-456 A.D.), a close friend and former neighbor of the poet. In the concluding lines of the elegy, Yen laments:

Alas!
 Even the best of men come to an end:
 Ch'ien Lou has died;
 Chan Ch'in,^y too, passed away.
 They were your models
 Who in the past trod the same dust.
 We now bestow on you the title Ching-chieh,^z
 Just as they were given the titles K'ang^{aa} and Hui^{ab}.³²

T'ao Yuan-ming was given the posthumous title "Ching-chieh," just as Ch'ien Lou was given the title of "K'ang." But who was the man named Chan Ch'in, posthumously titled "Hui"? A further search has disclosed his identity: he was none other than the incorruptible sage, popularly known as "Liu-hsia Hui,"^{ac} meaning the "Benevolent One Under the Willows."³³ Liu-hsia Hui is frequently mentioned in *The Analects* and in the *Mencius*,

because of his uprightness and moral integrity. Liu-hsia Hui has also been portrayed by some painters as a recluse seated under a willow tree, encircled by humble folk seeking counsel. Although there is only one allusion to Liu-hsia Hui in T'ao Yuan-ming's poems,³⁴ it is possible that the poet's admiration for the sage was known to Yen Yen-chih, who therefore made the allusion to Chan Ch'in (Liu-hsia Hui's real name), along with Ch'ien Lou, in his "Elegy for T'ao Yuan-ming." /t is entirely possible that the poet's choice of the name Mr. Five Willows, for his persona (or self-image) implies symbolically the affinities between his biography and Liu Hsia Hui, the man whose house was overhung with willows.

In addition, the willow is a generally recognized symbol of gentleness and weakness. According to the *Pen-t's'ao kang-yao*^{ad} (*Encyclopedia of Trees and Herbs*) of Li Shih-chen,^{ae} the willow is so called because of its pliability and ability to go with the flow of nature. Weakness and softness are highly commended in the *Lao-tzu*: "The use of *Tao* consists in weakness";³⁵ and again: "The softest of all things override the hardest of all things."³⁶

Nowhere, however, is T'ao Yuan-ming's Taoist vision more clearly manifested than in his famous utopian tale, "Tao-hua yuan-chi"^{af} ("Peach Blossom Spring"), a poem of thirty-two lines which is prefaced by a prose narrative. This prose narrative is frequently anthologized as an independent piece of work. The story is about a certain fisherman of Wu-ling,^{ag} who by chance discovers an idyllic world of peace and tranquility, whose inhabitants are uncontaminated by modern civilization:

During the T'ai-yuan^{ah} period of the Chin dynasty, a fisherman of Wu-ling once rowed upstream, unmindful of the distance he had gone, when he suddenly came to a grove of peach trees in bloom. For several hundred paces on both banks of the stream there was no other kind of tree. The wild flowers growing under them were fresh and lovely, and the fallen petals covered the ground . . . He went on for a way with the idea of finding out how far the grove extended. It came to an end at the foot of a mountain whence issued the spring that supplied the stream. There was a small opening

in the mountain and it seemed as though light was coming through it. The fisherman left his boat and entered the cave, which at first was extremely narrow, barely admitting his body; after a few dozen steps it suddenly opened out onto a broad and level plain where well-built houses were surrounded by rich fields and pretty ponds. Mulberry, bamboo and other trees and plants grew there, and criss-cross paths skirted the fields. The sounds of cocks crowing and dogs barking could be heard from one courtyard to the next. Men and women were coming and going about their work in the fields. Old men and boys were carefree and happy."

The simple description of this agricultural pastoral given by T'ao Yuan-ming, and his use of animal imagery of cocks and dogs call to mind chapter 80 of *Lao-tzu*, which reads:

Let there be a small country with a small population.
 Though there may be tens and thousands of contrivances
 The people have no use for them.
 They love their lives here and will not migrate.
 Though there are ships and carriages, none will ride in them.
 Though there are weapons and arrows, none will regard them.
 May the people return to knotting cords.
 Let them enjoy their food and clothing, and cherish their
 home and customs.
 Though the neighboring countries are within sight,
 And the cocks crowing and dogs barking can be heard,
 They may grow old and die without visiting them."

Could this ideal, primitive society conceived by Lao Tzu be the antecedent of T'ao Yuan-ming's vision of his "Peach Blossom Spring" outside the world of men? However, T'ao's narrative does not end with the description of his ideal society; it goes on to tell of its inaccessibility at the end of the tale:

After the fisherman had gone out and recovered his boat, he carefully marked the route. On reaching the city, he reported what he had found to the magistrate, who at once sent a man to follow him back to the place. They proceeded according to the marks he had made, but went astray and were unable to find the cave again. A high-minded gentleman of Nan-yang named Liu Tzu-chi heard the story and happily made preparations to go there, but before he could leave he fell sick and died. Since then no one has been interested in trying to find such a place."

This short story, with its straight-forward style and simple language, has established a tradition of utopian literature in China. It has so stirred the creative imagination that for generations the story has been told and retold by creative men of letters in various forms. Among the better known is the T'ang poet Wang Wei, whose "Song of Peach Blossom Spring" is admittedly based on T'ao Yuan-ming's narrative, although Wang Wei has added a supernatural quality to it by giving immortality to the inhabitants of this ethereal world. Recently, a play bearing the same title, *Peach Blossom Spring*, written by Chang Hsiao-feng of Taiwan, has been produced on stage. This play provides a new sub-plot touching on contemporary issues. It places greater emphasis on the conflict between escapism and social commitment.

Aside from being a source of imagination for the creative mind, T'ao's "Peach Blossom Spring" has been the subject of various critical works. Some consider it a charming fairy tale; others claim it is a political satire or a social protest against the chaos of the author's own times. What was T'ao Yuan-ming's intention in the narrative? May the reader believe what he wrote elsewhere, i.e., that he wrote (as in "Mr. Five Willows") simply to amuse himself and to express his feelings? The utopian vision of T'ao Yuan-ming shares the simplicity and innocence of the Garden of Eden before the Fall, and the peace and beauty of Shelley's Arcadian pastoral. But unlike Shelley, who had faith in the realization of his utopian dream in some distant future (as expressed in his "Helas"), T'ao Yuan-ming has stressed that his "Peach Blossom Spring" is unattainable in

this mundane world for men who have lost their pristine innocence or the *Tao*. But it did exist for the poet, not only in his imagination, but in the reality of his being. For utopia is, after all, a state of mind, not to be found in the outside world, as T'ao Yuan-ming himself has told us: "When the heart is remote (i.e., free and detached from the dusty world)," it creates its own hermitage (or utopia).⁴⁰ The poet has created and retained such a utopia in his Taoist vision.

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NOTES

1. Unlike Confucius (551-479 B.C.), whose dates and historical existence have been clearly established, Lao Tzu, presumably slightly older than Confucius, remains legendary, because his origin is wrapped in myth and legend. His name is said to be Lao Tan, and the author of the *Lao-tzu* (also known as the *Tao-te-thing*), one of the oldest of the three most famous Taoist texts, the other two being *Chuang-tzu* and *Leih-tzu*.
2. Chuang Chou, better known as Chuang Tzu, whose dates are tentatively given as 369-286 B.C., was a contemporary of Mencius and Mo Tzu. *Chuang-Mu*, the second most important Taoist text, bears his name and is traditionally attributed to him. The book consists of thirty-three chapters which are divided into three sections: seven are known as the "Inner Chapters"; fifteen, the "Outer Chapters"; the remaining eleven are under "Miscellaneous." Unlike his contemporary philosophers who were all committed to social or political reforms, Chuang Tzu's concerns were with the life and freedom of the individual.
3. Arthur Waley, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), p. ix.
4. Mencius, the most distinguished follower of Confucianism, has his sayings and conversations collected in the *Book of Mencius* which has been incorporated into the *Four Books*, forming the basic canon of Confucian education.
5. Arthur Christy, *Images in Jade; Translations from Classical and Modern Chinese Poetry* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1929), pp. 25-26.
6. T'ao Ch'ien was the name he adopted later, after the accession of Liu Yu, who proclaimed him self emperor of the Liu Sung dynasty (240-477 A.D.), following the downfall of Eastern Chin (317-419 A.D.).
7. Joseph Rafter, *The Philosophy of Spinoza Selected from His Chief Works* (New York: The Modern Library, 1927), p. xxxiii.
8. See Harry Austryn Wolfson *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), Vol. 1, p. 16.
9. *Chuang Tzu; Basic Writings*, trans. by Burton Watson (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 26. Cited as Watson in subsequent notes.
10. All translations in this essay when not otherwise specified are mine. I prefer to use my own translations whenever I differ from other's interpretations.
11. James Hightower, *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 268.
12. Hightower, pp. 269-270.
13. *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth* (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 632.
14. Wordsworth, pp. 205-206.
15. Wordsworth, p. 207.
16. Translation mine; for other versions, see A. R. Davis, *T'ao Yuan-ming; His Poems and Their Meaning* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), Vol. I, p. 56; Hightower, pp. 79-80.
17. Watson, p. 37.
18. *Yin-chiu erh-shih shou*, no. 5. Translation mine. For other translations, see Davis, Vol. I, p. 96; Hightower, p. 130.
19. *Lao-tzu*, chapter 1.
20. Watson, p. 140.
21. Wordsworth, p. 589.
22. See Davis, Vol. I, p. 55.
23. Davis, Vol. I, p. 36.
24. Translation mine.
25. Watson, p. 33.
26. Watson, p. 97.
27. Hightower, pp. 42-43.
28. *Sung-shu* (488 A.D.), chapter 93; *Chin-shu* (644 A.D.), chapter 94;
29. biography in his compilation of the *Collected Works of Tao Yuan-ming*. The chronology of T'ao Yuan-ming remains controversial even to this day. For various opinions see Wang Kui-ling, *T'ao Yuan-ming chi ch'i shi^h ti yen-chiu* (Taipei: Taiwan University Press, 1966), pp. 2-22.
30. Translation mine. For other versions, see Davis, Vol. I, p. 208.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Yen Yen-chih, *Chi T'ao ching-chieh*, included in *Wen-hsuan*, 57, 20aff. For

- another translation, see Davis, Vol. I, p. 249.
33. One version is that the sage Liu-hsia Hui is so called because his house was overhung with willows; the other is that he was from Liu-hsia, which might be a place name so named because of its surrounding willows.
34. The allusion to Liu-hsia Hui and his peace-loving nature is found in T'ao's "Drinking Songs, no. 18," which reads: "At times he refused to speak. Was it that because he was asked to counsel on war? The good man acts according to his conscience. How could he err either in speaking out or keeping silent?" Cf. Davis, Vol. I, p. 101. The reference is derived from the *Han-shu* 56, 176, in which it is said that Liu-hsia Hui was consulted by the ruler of Lu, who wished to attack the state of Ch'i. Liu-hsia Hui remained silent. Later he said to himself, "A good man should not be consulted about wars. Why was I asked?"
35. *Lao-tzu*, chapter 40, Translation mine.
36. *Lao-tzu*, chapter 42, Translation mine.
37. Hightower, p. 254.
38. *Lao-tzu*, chapter 80, Translation mine.
39. Hightower, p. 355.
40. "Drinking Song, no. 5," as cited earlier.

CHINESE GLOSSARY

a	老子	r	陶侃
b	道	s	五柳先生傳
c	老子	t	贊
d	莊子	u	黔婁
e	莊周	v	無懷
f	史記	w	葛天
g	司馬遷		顏延之
h	宋	y	展禽
	齊	z	靖節
j	楚	as	康
k	陶淵明	ab	惠
	陶潛	ac	柳下惠
In	賦	ad	草本綱要
n	歸去來兮	ae	李時珍
o	彭澤	of	桃花源記
p	形影神	ag	武陵
q	柴桑, 九江	ah	太原