
Tao Yuanming's Poetics of Awkwardness

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Tao Yuanming (aka Tao Qian, 365–427) is one of the greatest Chinese poets. He is renowned for writing poetry in praise of a bucolic life of simple pleasures. A popular poet during his lifetime, from the eleventh century on he has obtained an iconic status in Chinese cultural tradition. In modern times, Tao Yuanming is the topic of numerous books and articles. Scholars in East Asia primarily focus on Tao's chronology and the dating of his poems, the interaction of his personality and his poetry and, in recent years, the reception of his poetry over the centuries. In English-language scholarship James R. Hightower and A.R. Davis have provided complete translations of Tao Yuanming's poems with comprehensive notes and discussions (Hightower 1970; Davis 1984). Stephen Owen's reading of Tao Yuanming as "the first great poetic autobiographer" challenges the traditional notion of Tao as a transparent, spontaneous poet (Owen 1986, 78). In the twenty-first century, there was a "Tao Yuanming Wave" when three monographs on Tao were published in the span of five years: Tian's book is the first study ever of how Tao's poetry has been reshaped by the forces of medieval Chinese manuscript culture, discussing how a different choice of textual variants can lead to a drastically different reading of the poems (Tian 2005); Swartz's book offers the most detailed history in English of the reception of Tao Yuanming to date and contextualizes his reception in shifting reading paradigms (Swartz 2008); Ashmore uses Tao's poems about reading Confucian classics, especially the *Analects*, as a point of entry to explore the poet and the early medieval Chinese classicist tradition (Ashmore 2010). Together these studies have brought Tao Yuanming studies in English to new depths.

Several biographies in dynastic histories compiled from the fifth through early seventh centuries provide a sketch of Tao Yuanming's life, which can also be reconstructed from

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his own writings. His great-grandfather had been a military genius credited with saving the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420) and was awarded with a ducal title. The clan's fortune had declined by Tao Yuanming's time, though it maintained its prestige. Tao began his official career at the provincial level, but resigned shortly afterward. Some years later, to support his expanding family, he went into public service for a second time, but after a while resigned once again, this time for good. From 406 till his death, he lived on the yields from the land he owned, turning down several summons to office. As opposed to the stability of official emolument, he chose a life dependent on many contingencies, as flood, drought, and plague could all devastate the harvest and bring a bad year.

For premodern Chinese recluses, withdrawal from public life did not necessarily mean withdrawal from social life. Living in reclusion, Tao nevertheless maintained friendships with court officials and local gentry at his hometown Xunyang (in modern Jiangxi). One of his closest friends was Yan Yanzhi (384–456), who was to become the most eminent court writer in the Liu–Song dynasty (420–479). After Tao's passing Yan wrote an elegy, the first extant contemporary record of Tao other than Tao's own accounts. In it, Yan describes Tao as a man of simplicity who delighted in reading and drinking ale. Yet, Tao's own writings have left us with a much more complex voice than such an image of serenity and contentment allows. This chapter introduces Tao's poetry in terms of his modes of self-representation and his poetics of awkwardness, arguing that, in exploring such universal issues of identity, pursuit of happiness, and poetic self-representation in his unique ways, Tao Yuanming is a poet who not only belongs to the Chinese literary and cultural tradition but also very much belongs to the world.

Representing the Self

Compared with narrative autobiography, poems are usually brief; their brevity is suited to expressing, in Virginia Woolf's words, "moments of being," not to undertaking the task of enforcing on a life a unity and identity across time as its prose counterpart does. Tao Yuanming did compose a work of autobiography in prose – it is the famous "Biography of Master Five Willows" (*Wuliu xiansheng zhuan*), which the historian and poet Shen Yue (441–513) says was widely recognized by his contemporaries as a "veritable record" of Tao himself (Shen 1974, 2287). In the (auto)biography Tao describes a taciturn yet complacent Master Five Willows who "forgets about losses and gains, and lives out his life in this manner."¹ Carolyn Barros defines autobiography as "someone telling someone else 'something happened to me'" (Barros 1998, 6), but in this piece absolutely nothing happens: the Master does not "do," but simply "is" – even though, interestingly, he is largely defined by what he is *not*. Every positively stated fact is counterbalanced by a negation: he is "tranquil and does *not* have many words"; he "does *not* covet glory and gain"; he "enjoys reading but does *not* seek any profound understanding"; he "loves ale but is *unable* to frequently indulge in it because of his poverty" (my italics). And so it goes on.

Nevertheless, Tao Yuanming's prose (auto)biography, though much shorter, presents a cohesive self no less than the autobiography of, say, Thomas Jefferson. "The whole thrust of such works," as Shari Benstock argues, "is to seal up and cover over gaps in memory, dislocations in time and space, insecurities, hesitations and blind spots" (Benstock 1993,

1048). Perhaps in Tao's case the only gap apparent is between the (auto)biography's author and its subject, Master Five Willows: while Master Five Willows forgets "losses and gains," it is clear that the writer of such a statement has not. This implicit rift is more explicitly revealed in Tao's poems: in representing disturbing and discomforting "moments of being," the poems reveal the fissures in the seamless selfhood of Master Five Willows constructed in the (auto)biography and betray a remarkably complex voice.

A poem entitled, "Written and Presented to My Cousin Jingyuan in Mid-Twelfth Month of the Guimao Year [January 404]" ("Guimao sui shieryue zhong zuo yu congdi Jingyuan") is a good example:

Resting my tracks behind the rustic door,	
I have long stayed away from the world.	
I look around, and no one knows;	
My bramble gate remains closed during the day.	4
A chilly wind blows at the year's end,	
Dim and dark, the snow falls all night.	
I strain my ears to listen: there's not even the faintest sound,	
But there before my eyes: an expanse of gleaming white.	8
The sharp air invades my lapels and sleeves;	
Plates and cups decline my frequent calls.	
Lonely and desolate, this empty house,	
Not a single thing brings delight.	12
Reading through the books of a thousand years,	
From time to time I see blazing deeds.	
Those noble standards I do not aspire to reach;	
Only by some cosmic error have I acquired this "firmness in adversity."	16
But if the great level road does not work out,	
Then how could one regard this reclusive life as one of clumsiness?	
I lodge my intent beyond these words –	
This understanding, who could discern?	20

The opening phrase, *qin ji* (resting one's tracks / hiding one's footprints), is both metaphorical and literal: the poem is built around the absence of tracks in the snow piling up around the recluse's house. The poet does not go out, and there is no visitor calling on him. As he looks around, he sees no one who knows anything about him, a man hidden behind a closed door and in a chilly, empty house surrounded by an undisturbed expanse of snow, warmed only by the "blazing deeds" of the ancients in the books he reads.

Among the ancients there was a man named Yuan An (d. 92 CE). As the story goes, after a major snowstorm lasting several days, Yuan was discovered lying under covers in his house when the local magistrate sent someone to dig through the snow and check on him. Asked why he did not dig his way out like everyone else had, Yuan famously replied: "After a great snowstorm people are all hungry, and it doesn't seem right to go out and bother them." Tao has alluded to this story explicitly in another poem, but here he claims that he has *by error* acquired "firmness in adversity" (a phrase from the *Analects*). In other words, he

has no desire for such a lofty reputation because he would rather not have adversity if only he could help it. There is a dark humor in this assertion. Witticism also colors lines 9 to 10. Even the household utensils mimic their master in staying away from human contact, as his pots and pans, empty of food and drink, “decline his frequent calls.” The only visitor is a “sharp air” that breaks through his clothes.

Not only has the poet retained his sense of humor, but he also keeps his ability to appreciate the magnificence of nature: there is a feeling of pleasant surprise at the “expanse of gleaming white” meeting his eyes, even though snow robs his house of warmth and blocks the “great level road.” The poem presents a cold, comfortless world that is not entirely dispossessed of beauty and humorousness, although it is by no means the sort of complacent world portrayed in “The Biography of Master Five Willows.” The poem ends with two questions, both indicating a sense of unease. The last might be a real question: with snow, the great leveler covering up the whole world, maybe nobody, not even his cousin Jingyuan, the recipient of the poem, could “discern” the traceless intent beyond the poetic word.

Tao Yuanming lived at a time when Buddhism was becoming prevalent throughout Chinese society. While there is no direct evocation of Buddhism in Tao’s poetry, his repeated reference to the life-changing decision to resign from office and return home bears an intriguing similarity to the conversion narrative in the Buddhist discourse. The eminent monk Huiyuan (334–416), a contemporary of Tao’s who also resided in the Xunyang region, wrote about his conversion to Buddhism in a letter addressed to a group of lay believers including Tao Yuanming’s good friend Liu Yimin (352–410):

In the past, when my mind roamed in the secular canon [i.e., Confucian classics], I regarded that canon as the flower garden of the day. Then, when I read *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, I realized that the Teaching of Names [a term for Confucianism] was just empty talk responding to the vicissitudes of this world. However, only now do I know that the Buddhist truth precedes all others in its profound metaphysical interest. (Yan 1987, 2390)

Huiyuan’s remarks delineate a progression of change, each phase marked by his repudiation of what had been taken to be the supreme teaching before.

Unlike Confucius’ (see *Echoes of the Classics in the Voice of Confucius*) famous statement about a gradual, lifelong process of self-cultivation (see *Analects* 2.4; Liu 1990, 43), in conversion narrative there is usually a clear defining point separating a “before” and an “after,” from which point one could look back on one’s life and declare the dramatic difference between the deluded former self and the enlightened present self. This describes the moment when Tao makes the decision to “return home” in a rhapsody entitled “Return” (“Guiqulai”):

I realize that there is no use to regret the past,
But I know the future can still be remedied.
In truth I have not strayed too far from the right path,
I am enlightened to how right I am today, and yesterday how wrong I was
...

But the resemblance stops here. If in religious conversion narrative we have $A \rightarrow B$ (non-believer \rightarrow believer) or in Huiyuan’s narrative of transformation we have $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$, then in Tao’s case we have $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A$. That is, I was born like this; then I did something

that made me go against my inborn nature; then I made a decision to revert to a life best suited to my inborn nature. As he states in the opening lines of one of his most famous poems, "Return to Garden and Fields" No. 1 ("Gui yuantian ju"):

In my youth my disposition was ill-suited to the common world;
 By nature I loved hills and mountains.
 I erred and fell into the snares of dust,
 And was away for thirty years in all.
 The caged bird craves the woods of old,
 And a fish in a pond yearns for former depths.
 Clearing wasteland at the edge of the southern wilds,
 I keep to my clumsiness and return to my gardens and fields ...

This is the first of a set of five poems, the rest exploring how the poet deals with life in reclusion. Initially content with his reclusive life and newfound solitude, the poet soon becomes worried about the crops in the second poem, and goes out in the third to weed the bean stalks, coming home late at night; the tranquil, if laborious, life is interrupted by a pleasure outing in the fourth poem, in which he chances upon the ruins of a village and is moved by the impermanence of human life; in the fifth poem he hosts a party at his house, carousing with his neighbors over chicken and ale all night, a striking contrast with his deliberate maintenance of distance from the local community in the first poem. Thus, unlike Augustine (see Augustine's *Confessions*), whose autobiographical narrative ends with his conversion, Tao's autobiographical poetry is mostly about how he lived with his decision in the aftermath.

Poetic autobiography "arises from the fear of being misprized" and from "the need to 'explain oneself'" (Owen 1986, 75). Particularly in an autobiographical poetry concerned with the unpleasant aftermath of a controversial decision, the poet sometimes agonizes about it – "did I make the right choice?" – and feels compelled to talk about it over and over again. Sometimes he feels a sense of pride about his decision, such as in No. 19 of the "Drinking" ("Yinjiu") series:

In the past, suffering from constant hunger,
 I tossed my plough and tried to learn the way of service.
 But I did not do it right in supporting my family;
 Cold and hunger continued to plague us. 4
 At the time I was almost at the age of "establishing myself,"
 And felt much shame in betraying my intent.
 So I did what I could for the sake of conscience:
 Shaking my robe, I came back to the fields. 8
 Slowly but surely the stars flowed onward in their course,
 And a twelve-year cycle has passed since.
 The roads in this world are numerous and all broad,
 And that was why Yang and Shu had stopped. 12
 Although there is no gold for me to dissipate,
 I can count on a cup of cloudy beer for the moment.

This poem offers an account of what seems to be Tao's first-time service and resignation. "Yang" in line 12 refers to the ancient philosopher Yang Zhu, who had shed tears at the forking paths because they reminded him of the difficulty of making the right choice. "Shu" refers to Shu Guang and his nephew Shu Shou from the first century BCE, who had served as tutors to the crown prince and decided to retire at the height of fame and prestige; they received a generous parting gift of gold from the emperor, and once home, they liberally spent the money feasting their clansmen instead of saving it up for their children. The poet seems to be congratulating himself on making a correct choice and getting out before it's too late like the two tutors. The poem is saved from facile complacency by the last two lines: with a typical self-deprecating humor, he implies that his retirement is neither missed by the emperor nor compensated by the royal gold – all he has is "a cup of cloudy beer," cheap brew for any traditional ale drinker.

In No. 10 of the "Drinking" series, he rationalizes his decision by claiming that it is foolish to pursue food, the body's sustenance, to the body's detriment:

Once I went far away from home,
 All the way to the edge of the Eastern Sea.
 The road I traveled was meandering and long,
 Wind and waves thwarted my progress. 4
 What made me go on this journey?
 It seems that I was driven by hunger.
 To give my life for a full meal,
 When just a little was more than enough – 8
 I feared that was not such a great plan,
 So I stopped my carriage and returned to a life of leisure.

When one is troubled by something, it is a common impulse to talk about it constantly. The obsessive return to the topic of his resignation becomes quite apparent when we read a sizable portion of Tao's poetry. Significantly, this is the first time in the Chinese tradition when it is necessary to read a poet's entire corpus, or at least a large part of his writings, to have a better appreciation of him – a fact that may partially account for the fact that Tao's is one of the very few literary collections from early medieval China that has been preserved more or less intact, when most of the literary collections produced in this period have become lost, scattered in sources such as anthologies and encyclopedias and only to be reconstituted from them much later. Tao is also obsessed with chronology: he is the first poet we know of who extensively dates his poems; he also likes to mention time – his age; how many years have elapsed ever since a certain event – within a poem. All this contributes to a poetic corpus that, when read together in its totality, conjures a life narrative of a specific historical person whose unique personal circumstances render him distinctly individual, not to be mistaken for a generic Recluse or, for that matter, any other man.

In keeping with the aforementioned $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A$ structure of this life narrative, the chief interest of Tao's poetic autobiography does not lie in how a person changes over time, but in how a person struggles to remain unchanged. In a poem entitled "In the Sixth Month

of the Wushen Year [July 408], We Had a Fire" ("Wushen sui liuyuezhong yuhuo"), the poet implicitly compares his physical body succumbing to the ravages of time to his house being burned down by fire and his spirit to a thing "so steady and firm, / that no jade is ever so hard." But within this "steady and firm" spirit the complexities of his inner being are actually a source of constant conflicts and fluctuations. No. 13 of the "Drinking" series wonderfully illustrates the clamoring multiple voices with personification:

I always have two guests staying with me;
 Their preferences are wildly apart.
 One gentleman is always drunk alone;
 One chap remains sober all year long. 4
 The drunkard and the sober one laugh at each other;
 Neither appreciates what the other has to say.
 How foolish is the assiduous one!
 The haughty fellow might seem a tad shrewder. 8
 A word to the intoxicated guest:
 When the sun goes down, how would you light your way?

James Hightower calls attention to this poem's similarity to Tao's "Body, Shadow, Spirit" ("Xing ying shen") poem, in which body, shadow, and spirit each voices its perspective on how to live one's life (1970, 144). That said, I am not so sure, as Hightower is, that this poem "is in praise of drunkenness." Tao is careful with his phrasing, and line 8, "the haughty fellow," clearly referring to the drunkard, uses the ambiguous word "seem" (*ruo*) to describe his "shrewdness" (*ying*). Indeed there is even an early textual variant that reads: "The haughty fellow, alas, is not shrewd either." The last line also has a textual variant that makes the tone uncertain. Hightower adopts the variant "When the sun goes down, *light the candles*" (my italics) which sounds as if the speaker "I" were approving and encouraging the drunkard ("Keep on drinking!"), but "how would you light your way," the variant adopted here, sounds more ominous. The ambiguity may very well be deliberate, and the "I" in the opening line and the host to his two guests – the most interesting figure in this poem – is shown to be literally living with conflicting convictions within himself. In fact, it is the same with "Body, Shadow, Spirit": while many scholars tend to regard "spirit" as the party with which the poet identifies himself, the point of the poem is that a human being comprises all three parts and that each part has a valid point of view. Tao is always keenly aware of the material needs of the body; he works at "learning the way of service" to fulfill these needs, and decides to quit only because he realizes that there is something more important than a "full meal" and – this is very important – that the needs can be modified, for one can live on "just a little." He frequently expresses that it is only when he cannot even get those bare necessities that he becomes really upset.

In speaking of the multiple voices within the self, we must also speak of inconsistency of behavior, which is a sort of outward manifestation of internal conflicts. But because behavior is apparent to others, Tao's poetry is as much an attempt to explain himself to others as an endeavor to relieve his own sense of embarrassment. Sometimes he states his embarrassment explicitly; sometimes he conveys it in the way a poem is written – in what

Jane Austen (see Jane Austen on the Global Stage) calls “little zigzags of embarrassment” that find expression in linguistic maneuvers.

Being Awkward

Tao Yuanming often talks about shame and embarrassment in his poems. The two emotions overlap somewhat, but in specific cases of application we can easily discern their distinction from each other: when a country is devastated by foreign invaders, its citizens feel “national shame” but not “national embarrassment”; when one is praised extravagantly in public, even if the praise is deserved, one feels embarrassment, though not shame. Classical Chinese has many words covering a whole range of these emotions – *kui*, *chi*, *jiu*, *xiu*, or their physical manifestation, *hanyan*, literally “sweating in the face,” which may be translated as “blush.” Each of the words has its peculiar flavor, and must be understood and translated according to the context in which it is used.

In No. 19 of the “Drinking” series cited above, Tao mentions he had had many causes for shame (*duo suo chi*) while working as a low-level official. But the life of reclusion has its own indignities; for instance, he could not afford to buy ale on one Double Ninth Festival, a day on which people would drink by convention. He displaces his mortification to his drinking vessels in “Dwelling at Leisure on the Ninth Day” (“Jiuri xianju”): “The dusty wine-cup shames the empty flask.” But at other times he wears his “shame” (*kui*) as a badge of honor: delighted by the spring scenery on his farm land, where he participates in plowing, he is aware that such pleasure is deemed unworthy of a “gentleman”: “Speaking of this, I am put to shame by the wise men – / Isn’t what I cherish shallow and insignificant!” Here his “shame” is not to be taken at face value.

He is much more troubled by certain inconsistencies that rupture the presentation of a coherently unified self. The sense of discomfort is apparent even when he does not explicitly state so:

Zhanggong had once served in office,	
But his integrity was misprized.	
Closing the door behind him, he did not venture out again;	
He relinquished society for the rest of his life.	4
Zhongli went home to Great Marsh,	
There his noble quality began to emerge.	
Once you left, you should follow through;	
Why were you so full of doubts?	8
O let it go – what more is there to say?	
The world has long misled me.	
Just dismiss the talk of the crowd;	
Let me follow my own path.	12

Zhanggong was Zhang Zhi, the son of a famous Han official from the second century BCE; he either resigned or was relieved of his office and never served again because he could not get along with his superiors. Zhongli was Yang Lun, a classics scholar from the second century CE. According to his biography, “he was summoned to office three times, but each

time offended the powers that be with his outspokenness" (Fan 1965, 2565). He finally went home and declined further summons to serve, and died in retirement. Listing the two men side by side invites comparison: one makes a decision to retire and sticks with it; the other oscillates several times, just as the poet has. Lines 7–8 represent the sort of question posed to Yang as well as to the poet himself, and he tries to dismiss it in lines 9–10, resolving in the last couplet to "follow his own path" with no regard for "the talk of the crowd." Nevertheless, he is clearly bothered by the question.

Doubts and uncertainties are closely associated with the poet's concern about other people's opinions, as in this poem:

Of such a dark green is the tree in the valley;
 From winter through summer it is always like this.
 Every year it bears witness to frost and snow:
 Who could say that it does not know of seasonal change? 4
 I am tired of hearing the discourse of the world;
 I wish to seek friendship at Linzi.
 Under the Ji Gate there are many fine talkers;
 They would point to past examples and resolve my doubts. 8
 I have already packed a while ago;
 I have even bidden farewell to my family.
 I started leaving, but paused upon going out the door;
 Then I went back, sitting down and thinking some more: 12
 I do not worry about the distant journey;
 I only fear people might mislead me.
 If something disappointing should happen,
 I would become a laughing-stock to all. 16
 These concerns – I cannot express them fully;
 So I write, my dear sir, this poem for you.

The poet's silent musings, tortuous with racking doubts, are contrasted with the smooth talkers in the big city who chatter but do not reflect. There is much embarrassment and shame in the poem: the embarrassment about lingering on after having already taken one's leave; the imagined shame of becoming a laughing-stock if things do not go well. The poet presents himself as someone who cannot express his complex psychological workings in the "discourse of the world" but who can do so only in poetry, as poetry enables him to say things he could not say otherwise or at least to gesture toward what lies beyond these words.

In "Begging for Food" ("Qishi"), poetry writing is once again a motif in the poem – it helps the poet articulate his gratitude for his host – but the poem itself embodies the poet's embarrassment with its verbal intricacies like nothing else in Tao's corpus.

Hunger came – it drove me out,
 I had no idea where I was going.
 Walking on and on – I came to this neighborhood,
 Knocking on the door, I fumbled for words. 4

The host – he knew my intent;
 He gave – fulfilling a vain hope.
 We talked in perfect accord till evening,
 Every time I raised my cup, I drank up. 8
 Delighted by the joy of a new understanding,
 I chanted and composed poetry.
 I am moved by your generosity like the washerwoman's –
 I am embarrassed that I don't have Han Xin's talent. 12
 Filled with gratitude – how can I ever thank you? –
 I will repay your kindness from the underworld.

Han Xin, a general whose achievement was instrumental in the founding of the Han dynasty, was very poor as a young man. A washerwoman gave him food for a dozen days and was offended when Han Xin spoke of future payback. Later, Han Xin was enfeoffed as a marquis and presented a hundred catties of gold to her. The last line is an allusion to an ancient story about an old man who as a ghost tied knots with grass to trip his benefactor's enemy and thus saved the benefactor's life.

I have translated the poem with many dashes inserted as an attempt to convey the staccato rhythm of embarrassment and discomfort. The poet was driven out from his house by hunger – mimicking, on a smaller scale, the journey he undertakes in No. 10 of the “Drinking” series – but this time hunger seems more literal than metaphorical, and the physical body driven by a sheer corporeal need moves of its own accord, taking the poet to “this neighborhood” and this door. Knocking on the door is again a bodily act, and when the door opens, he is too embarrassed to say what he wants. This is an extremely awkward moment, yet nothing compares to what follows. Relieved by the host's understanding and generosity, apparently without his ever having to state the purpose of his visit, the poet relaxes and even begins to enjoy himself. Words flow out as he takes in food and drink – clearly he has stayed for dinner. Not only does he converse freely, but when tipsy with ale, he composes poetry to commemorate the occasion.

By Tao's time there had been a long tradition of composing “public banquet poetry,” in which the retainer-guest disgorges elegant words of praise and gratitude in exchange for the lord-host's hospitality and bounty. But never do we see anything so plain and awkward as the last four lines of this poem, as what he says basically amounts to an admission that he will never be able to repay his host's favor in this lifetime. This is a poem that, in short, can leave a sensitive reader cringe at its well-crafted awkwardness. It is a verbal embodiment of the poet's embarrassment, capped by an unsentimental, sober, and harsh title, “Begging for Food.”

Tao Yuanming is good at representing the “little zigzags” of the human psyche. The apparent verbal simplicity of his poetry – with no difficult diction or obscure allusions to earlier texts – conceals a great psychological complexity and a robust play with words with deep contemporary cultural resonance. During the Song dynasty (960–1279), scholars began to edit Tao's collection in such a way that many early textual variants were dismissed as “inauthentic” because they do not conform to the preconceived image of the poet as a simple and spontaneous man, an image stabilized by the very exclusion of those variants. Let us briefly return to “Return to Gardens and Fields” No. 1:

In my youth my disposition was ill-suited to the common world;	
By nature I loved hills and mountains.	
I erred and fell into the snares of dust,	
And was away for thirty years in all.	4
The caged bird craves the woods of old,	
And a fish in a pond yearns for former depths.	
Clearing wasteland at the edge of the southern wilds,	
I keep to my clumsiness and return to my gardens and fields.	8
My estate spans more than a couple of acres,	
My thatched cottage contains a few rooms.	
Elms and willows shade the back eaves,	
Peach and plum spread in front of the hall.	12
The distant community is lost in a haze,	
Smoke from the village hearths lingers in the air.	
A dog barks in the deep lanes,	
On top of a mulberry tree a rooster crows.	16
There is no dust and disorder in house or yard;	
The empty chambers are filled with leisure.	
For a long time I have been in a cage,	
<u>Now again</u> I return to the natural way of life.	20

The underlined part of the last line has a textual variant. Instead of the reassuring affirmative statement, we have a question: “How can I return to the natural way of life?” It is a disquieting question, especially after the poet spills so much ink depicting a peaceful pastoral scene. For nearly a millennium no edition of Tao’s collected works has adopted this variant; in fact all Tao Yuanming scholars were silent about it, as if embarrassed by its existence. But if we consider the intellectual discourse of Tao’s time, the issue of acquiring a “second nature” through years of studying and practicing had long been an established topic. After being “caged” for a long time, the poet may very well feel that he is unable to live free again because he is used to the constraints and distortions. It is not an easy, comforting ending.

But Tao Yuanming doesn’t write to make people comfortable; rather, he recreates difficult human situations in his poems, orders the small messes of life, manages embarrassments, and attempts to think them through – and readers draw a different kind of comfort from his poetry by witnessing how he grapples with questions such as, “How can one be happy and content in life? Should I care about what others say or think of me?” These questions resonate with us still a thousand years later, across different ages and cultures. In posing these questions and attempting to answer them in poetry, Tao Yuanming is a poet who very much belongs to all times and the whole world.

SEE ALSO: Introduction to World Literature Third Millennium BCE to 600 CE; From Epic to Lyric; The Imperial Poetics of Ancient Bucolic

NOTE

1 All translations in this chapter are mine.

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