

# **Tao Yuanming: The Complete Works**

Translated by Earl Trotter

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# Preface

This book is a translation of the complete works of Tao Yuanming (陶淵明) as commonly accepted (although there are some disagreements about the inclusion or exclusion of certain pieces). It is intended primarily to the reader of classical Chinese poetry who has more than a passing interest. Therefore a brief introduction and chapter introductory material is included to help orient the reader. As well, basic footnotes are provided to identify people, places and significant allusions. Finally, the Chinese text is included as a reference. My approach to translation is covered in the appropriate section in the Introduction.

This is not a scholarly edition and the reader is directed to the works of Davis and Hightower (see Selected Bibliography) both of whom spent years on translating and annotating Tao Yuanming. Their work has been invaluable to me and anyone who desires in-depth knowledge of the poems should consult their volumes. Other studies of Tao are included in the bibliography which cover various aspects of his work and reception which I only briefly touch on.

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# Introduction

## Background

It is necessary to understand the political and cultural background before looking at Tao Yuanming's life and work. With the fall of the Han dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE), chaos ruled. This is reflected in the name for the following era, the Six Dynasties. This was especially true during the first period, the Eastern Wu dynasty (222-280), but things were unstable even in the following Eastern Jin dynasty (317-420) during which Tao was born, and the Liu Song dynasty (420-479) during which he died. There were ongoing wars and in the end China lost its northern territories.

Although Confucian ideals still reigned, in such turmoil, opportunism and self-serving greed would have fertile ground. For a person of steadfast principles such as Tao, such an environment would be intolerable. However there would be an inner conflict between the principle of serving the state and removing oneself from such an environment. As well, for an educated person there were few other alternative ways to make a living. In the midst of all this, Liu Yu usurped the throne and established the Liu Song dynasty. Tao, in spite of the corruption, may have felt some loyalty to the previous regime.

We will discuss the poetical background later, but as for the general cultural background, as mentioned above, Confucianism ruled. This meant a hierarchical and patriarchal society, with a focus on ritual, prescribed behaviour, and the study and application of the classic texts, namely the Four Books and Five Classics. Of special note regarding our author, the *Book of Songs* and the *Analects* seem most alluded to, although there is little doubt he was familiar with all of them. Alternatively there was Daoism, especially as exemplified by the *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi*, with an emphasis on spontaneity and reclusion. There was also an established Dao religion with teachings, among other things, on elixirs and immortality. Finally, Buddhism was making headway.

Not far from Tao Yuanming's residence, Huiyuan, a forerunner of Pure Land Buddhism and influential in his time, had established a temple.

Based on the allusions in his work, Tao Yuanming was well read in the Confucian classics, the three Daoist books mentioned above and well as many miscellaneous works. One needs to keep this in mind when reading about his "life on the farm." One could call him an intellectual, but he was one who disdained honors and overly abstruse thought and valued virtue above all.

## Tao Yuanming's Life

Tao Yuanming (陶淵明), was born in 365 in Chaisang (柴桑) (now in Jiujiang, Jiangxi). Although other alternatives have been put forward, this is the generally accepted date. At some time later in his life, he assumed the sobriquet Tao Qian (陶潛), and as the latter character means "hidden", he likely chose it as a reflection of his choosing a life of retirement from government service.

He had one notable ancestor, his great-grandfather, Tao Kan (259-334). In 324, Emperor Ming made him governor of Jing Province and military commander of the western provinces. Later in life he was made Duke of Changsha and subsequently given the military command over eight provinces. Tao Yuanming's grandfather was prefect of Wuchang and his father prefect of Ancheng. But his father died when he was young and he grew up in straightened circumstances. Following is a simplified chronology of Tao's life (ages given are ancient Chinese style):

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| 365     | Born   |
| 376     | Father dies. Tao, his mother and two sisters go to live with relatives. (aet. 9) |
| 385-393 | Lives "in retirement." (aet. 21-29)  |
| 393     | His first post, Provincial Libationer at Jiangzhou. (aet. 29)                    |
| 394     | Around this time his first wife dies. (aet. 30)                                  |

- 394-398 Leaves position and returns to farm. Refuses subsequent offer. (aet. 30-34)
- 394 Eldest son Yan is born. (aet. 30)
- 396 Son Si is born. (aet. 32)
- 397 Sons Bin and Yi are born. (aet. 33)
- 398-401 Assistant to Huan Xuan at Jiangling. (aet. 34-37)
- 401 Mother dies at the end of the year. (aet. 37)
- 402-404 Retires to the country (in mourning). (aet. 38-39)
- 402 Youngest son Tong is born. (aet. 38)
- 404 Assistant to Liu Yu, soon to be emperor. (aet. 39-40)
- 405 Leaves position. Afterwards, Regional Inspector for Liu Jingxuan. (aet. 41)
- 405 Sister dies, which perhaps prompted his final retirement. (aet. 41)
- 405 Famously, magistrate of Penze for eighty days, then retires for good. (aet. 41)
- 405-427 Lives in retirement on his farm near his hometown. (aet. 41-63)
- 408 House burns down. (aet. 44)
- 415 Refuses official position on the pretext of illness. (aet. 51)
- 418 Becomes friends with Wang Hong, prefectural governor of Jiangzhou. (aet. 54)
- 427 Dies at age 63.

Tao Yuanming was married to Zhai Shi and was father to five sons. He had at least one daughter (see “In Reply To A Poem By Liu Of Chaisang”). It appears he had a previous wife who died (see “A Lament In The Chu Mode To Registrar Pang And Secretary Deng”), however the exact year and sequence of events is not clear. He seems to have left office about five times in the twelve-year timespan during which he held some position. For the last part of his life, living as a farmer, his lifestyle should be taken in context, as contrasting with the life of an official in the city. He would certainly have endured hardships but he would have had at least one servant, hired farmhands and friends who would often visit. He also seems to have had an impressive library. He also must have had some renown in his time, otherwise he would have been relegated to oblivion after his death, which was not the case.

## Chinese Poetry Up To The Time Of Tao Yuanming

The foundation of Chinese poetry is the *Shijing* or *Book of Songs* (11<sup>th</sup> century BCE to 7th century BCE). The *Shijing* poems are for the most part composed in four-character lines. Common techniques are narrative, metaphor and foreshadowing. Although many of them were originally simple folk songs, an allegorical meaning was later ascribed to them. One common device was the repetition of the first character in a line. Also, most of the songs are rhyming, with end rhyme, as well as frequent internal rhyming.

The next important collection is *Chu Ci* or *Songs of Chu* with poems by Yu Quan, Song Yu and a number of other writers. Yu Quan (c. 340 BCE – 278 BCE) is the most important, especially for his “*Li Sao*” or “The Lament.” This poem is a *fu* or rhapsody which is a genre of expository rhymed prose, usually of great length. Style-wise, the *fu* had varying line lengths, using an extensive vocabulary, alliteration and loose parallelism. This form became quite popular over the next few hundred years. Many of the poems in the *Songs of Chu* metrically resemble those in the *Book of Songs*, having four-character lines and using rhyme. Others have varied line lengths.

In the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), traditions of the above two collections were continued. As well, the Music Bureau or *Yuefu*, gathered folk song and poetry lyrics from all over the country. This in themselves are important but they also became the model for the later literary new *yuefu* of the Tang Dynasty. Most important perhaps is the collection, *Nineteen Old Poems* (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE). They were significant as they used a five-character line which became the basis of later poetry and eventually the norm, from the Tang dynasty on. As well these poems tend to have emotions presented in a natural manner, with little of the artifice of the following period.

During the Six Dynasties period, before Tao Yuanming's time, the most important poets were the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove: Liu Ling (221–300), Ruan Ji (210–263), Ruan Xian (fl. 3rd century), Xiang Xiu, Wang Rong (234–305) and Shan Tao (205–283). Of these Ruan Ji is the most important. He wrote in various line lengths but five-character lines were common as well as four. His poetry is intense and characterized by vivid imagery. The whole group was influenced by Daoist ideals.

## Tao Yuanming's Poetry

Based on his allusions, one would have to say Tao was most influenced by the *Book of Songs*, *The Chu Ci* and the *Nineteen Old Poems*. He wrote three *fu* and they also show the influence of earlier writers in this genre. But there seems to be no specific poet whom he was modelling after. We will leave comments on metrical aspects of his work to the introductions of the various sections of his work, and focus here on subject matter and general considerations.

Tao's philosophical background is, at core, Confucian, using the word in a general sense. He has a great concern with virtue, family and reading the Classics. And he wrote poems relating to burial rituals. It should be noted though, that many of his references to the *Analects*, allude to recluses. In his post-retirement poems, Daoism, as contained in the *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi* loom large and these teachings likely had a greater impact on him as time went by. The *Zhuangzi* was the greatest influence here with its teachings of non-ambition and naturalness. However, his late "Sacrificial Piece To Myself" still has a strong Confucian sensibility. There may have been some Buddhist influence given his proximity to Huiyuan, but it is difficult to point out any definitive references.

Tao wrote in various forms: elegies, exchange poems, sacrificial songs, linked verse, love verse, admonitions, history. However he is best known for his field and garden (*tianyuan*) poetry as it was

afterwards labelled (in contradistinction to his contemporary, Xie Lingyun's mountain and stream (*shanshui*) poetry). These are all his poems on living in the country and working the farm. One might also include his drinking wine poems as a subset. His style is plain and his feelings come across as sincere and this combination make these poems easy to appreciate across cultures and time.

As for Tao Yuanming's reception, in the latter part of his life and immediately after his death, he was seen primarily as a figure of reclusion (i.e. someone who refrains from office) who also wrote poetry. Fortunately his poetry was anthologized and preserved. Wang Ji ((590-644) in the early Tang dynasty (618–907), took Tao as a model and engaged in farming and wrote verse in a simple style on bucolic themes as well as drinking songs. His poems were usually in the five-character style. He proved a bridge for Tao to the High Tang where poets, also struggling with the demands of office versus inner development, esteemed Tao's poems and lifestyle and he was forever propelled into fame. The Song dynasty (960–1279) continued emulation of him, often with a more political slant.

Although the rural poems are among his best, it is important to read other poems of his corpus in order to get a full picture of the man. In this regard, his “Linked Verse” and *fu* “Keeping The Passions In Check” are enlightening.

## **A Note On The Translation**

A poem can be analyzed into many elements, all interrelated of course. I have given priority to meaning. Although across such a span of time and cultures, one cannot be expected to catch every nuance, still an approximation to the original is possible. So, from a twenty-first century's reader's perspective, I try and capture and present his intended meaning as much as possible.

Secondly I have tried to replicate to some degree, the original structure. What this means in practice, is that the lines are left

intact, that the couplet remains as a unit and that word order is preserved. The couplet, which is usually two distinct clauses, is most frequently divided by a semicolon after the first line. Sometimes the lines are end stopped, especially where a question or exclamation is involved. Sometime the lines run on if the sense demands it. In the odd case, four lines may make a unit. As for word order, as these poems are so remote in time and culture, inversions do not seem a problem. If too awkward, I have changed the order around. Leaving the lines intact has occasionally resulted in an unusually long or short line, but these are rare and I have left it as is. Another device used is the repetition of the first character of a line, which goes back to the *Book of Songs*. Sometimes I have translated it literally but have often reduced it to the one character.

As for sound, I have for the most part ignored rhyme, alliteration and so on. It would be very difficult to introduce these features without compromising the meaning. As well, the pronunciation in modern Chinese is different, so to a native Chinese reader the sound of the poem no longer matches the original, although some parallels would be present.

The Chinese text is in traditional characters and in the translation, names and places are rendered in pinyin. About the only term I haven't translated is "li" as it often (though not always) is used in symbolic expressions of great distance. The *li* is about one third of a mile. Also "the ten thousand things" is sometimes translated as such and sometimes as "myriad things." Its basic meaning is "everything" although there might be specific nuances ("nature", "heaven and earth" ...).

Kroll's *A Student's Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese* was invaluable. Many terms could only be rendered in the appropriate translation using this dictionary.

The Chinese edition used was 陶淵明集 (The Collected Poetry of Tao Yuanming), from 1911. This was available from *poem.8dou.net* but has since been removed. The text was compared to that of Davis (1984) and a few corrections made. The prose was

gathered from various sources but also checked against Davis. I have followed the sectional breakdown of the collection and used “chapter” as being the most appropriate designation. My numbering, for the most part, corresponds to Davis but as he excluded the “Linked Verse” poem at the end of Book Four, my assignment is one greater from that point on.



## Chapter 2: Five-Character Poems

There are twenty titles comprising twenty-nine poems in this chapter, all with the five character line which were to become increasingly important in the history of Chinese poetry. Five titles are a series of two to five poems. We can see in these poems the quintessential Tao Yuanming. A naturalness colored by his ideals of virtue and experience. Landscape does not play a large part in his work as he is more interested expressing his feelings and thoughts. He does of course pick out a concrete image that is the source, context or focus of his presentation. His style is simple but is done with skill and at his best, memorable lines and scenes remain long thereafter.

Many of his of most famous poems are in this section: “Body, Shadow and Spirit”, “The Double Ninth Festival in Retirement”, “Returning To Live in the Country”, and “Moving House.”



## 11 The Double Ninth Festival<sup>31</sup> in Retirement

Living in retirement, I delight in the name of the Double Ninth.  
The autumn chrysanthemums overflow my garden, but I have no  
way of getting any wine. So, lacking it, I avail myself of the Ninth  
Day blossoms and commit my feelings to words.

Life is brief but desires are ever many;  
and people joy in living long.  
The day and month have reached this date  
and, as is the custom, all delight in its name.  
The dew is cold, the gentle breeze has ceased;  
the weather is clear, the sky bright.  
The swallows have departed, not a shadow remains;  
the geese arrive, honking noisily.  
Wine can dispel a hundred worries;  
chrysanthemums can slow down the declining years.  
How about the thatched hut scholar?  
In vain, he watches the years pass by.  
The dusty cup shames the empty jug –  
the cold flowers in vain bloom.  
I make snug my garment and leisurely sing;  
in a pensive mood, deep feelings arise.  
Settled here at ease brings many joys –  
how can my staying not bring success?

31 A festival held on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month at which chrysanthemum wine was a staple.

## 九日閑居

餘閑居，愛重九之名。秋菊盈園，而持醪靡由，空服九華，寄懷於言。

世短意常多，  
斯人樂久生。  
日月依辰至，  
舉俗愛其名。  
露淒暄風息，  
氣澈天象明。  
往燕無遺影，  
來雁有餘聲。  
酒能祛百慮，  
菊為制頽齡。  
如何蓬廬士，  
空視時運傾！  
塵爵恥虛疊，  
寒華徒自榮。  
斂襟獨閑謠，  
緬焉起深情。  
棲遲固多娛，  
淹留豈無成？

## 12 Returning to Live in the Country

### I

When young, I felt outside the conventional;  
my nature from the first loved mountains and hills.  
I erred by falling into the world's dusty net,  
wandering there for thirteen years.  
Caged birds long for their old home in the woods;  
fish in ponds miss their deep pools of old.  
I have cleared some land to the south of town  
and maintaining simplicity, return to gardens and fields.  
My land is more than two acres square;  
my thatched cottage has eight or nine rooms.  
Elms and willows shade the eaves out back  
while peach and plum trees spread their branches out front.  
Faint are the far-off villages;  
smoke hovers over the houses.  
Dogs bark from the depth of lanes;  
cocks crow atop mulberry trees.  
In the front courtyard is no dust or din;  
in empty rooms idleness prevails.  
Long trapped in a cage  
once more I can return to nature.

### II

In the country, human affairs are uncommon;  
to this remote lane, few wheels and martingales come.  
During the day, I keep my thornwood gate shut;  
in empty rooms, worldly thoughts are cut off.  
From time to time in the twisting wastelands,  
I and others come and go, tramping over the grass.  
When we meet there is no general chit chat;  
rather, we speak of the growth of mulberry and hemp.  
My mulberry and hemp are taller every day  
and daily I extend my fields.  
Often I fear that frost or sleet may come  
and my crops become withered like the weeds.

## 歸園田居

### 其一

少無適俗韻，  
性本愛丘山。  
誤落塵網中，  
一去三十年。  
羈鳥戀舊林，  
池魚思故淵。  
開荒南野際，  
守拙歸園田。  
方宅十餘畝，  
草屋八九間，  
榆柳蔭後簷，  
桃李羅堂前。  
曖曖遠人村，  
依依墟里煙；  
狗吠深巷中，  
雞鳴桑樹顛。  
戶庭無塵雜，  
虛室有餘閑。  
久在樊籠裡，  
復得返自然。

### 其二

野外罕人事，  
窮巷寡輪鞅；  
白日掩荆扉，  
虛室絕塵想。  
時復墟曲中，  
披草共來往；  
相見無雜言，  
但道桑麻長。  
桑麻日已長，  
我土日已廣，  
常恐霜霰至，  
零落同草莽。

### III

I planted beans beneath the southern hill;  
the grass is flourishing but the sprouting beans are few.  
I get up at dawn to clear the weeds;  
Led by the moon, I return home carrying the hoe.  
Grass and trees grow along the narrow path;  
evening dew wets my clothes.  
Wet clothes is not enough for grief;  
if only what I wish for is not opposed.

### IV

For a long time I left wandering about hills and lakes,  
roving with pleasure over grass, woods and fields.  
So it was apt to take along my children and nephews  
and push through a thicket to some desolate ruins.  
We roamed between the mounds  
then lingered by a dwelling from the past.  
The well and hearth were all that remained  
amidst rotten pieces of mulberry and bamboo.  
I asked a wood gatherer happening by:  
“Do you know what’s happened to all these people?”  
The wood gatherer replied to me:  
“They’re dead and gone, no one is left.”  
‘In a single lifetime, court and markets change.’  
This a true statement, not false.  
A person’s life is like illusory transformations  
and at death returns to empty nothingness.

### V

Dissatisfied and remorseful, I return, staff in hand;  
through rugged terrain, the path meanders through a thicket.  
The mountain stream is clear and shallow –  
it is a good place to wash my feet.  
I strain my newly fermented wine;  
a chicken dinner attracts my neighbours.  
At sunset, the rooms darkens,  
but thorn torches will do for a bright candle.  
We become joyous but regret the shortness of the night –  
already, again the dawn arrives.

### 其三

種豆南山下，  
草盛豆苗稀，  
晨興理荒穢，  
帶月荷鋤歸。  
道狹草木長，  
夕露沾我衣，  
衣沾不足惜，  
但使願無違。

### 其四

久去山澤遊，  
浪莽林野娛。  
試攜子侄輩，  
披榛步荒墟。  
徘徊丘壟間，  
依依昔人居；  
井竈有遺處，  
桑竹殘朽株。  
借問採薪者：  
此人皆焉如？  
薪者向我言：  
死歿無復餘。  
一世異朝市，  
此語真不虛。  
人生似幻化，  
終當歸空無。

### 其五

悵悵獨策還，  
崎嶇歷榛曲。  
山澗清且淺，  
遇以濯吾足。  
漉我新熟酒，  
隻雞招近局。  
日入室中暗，  
荊薪代明燭。  
歡來苦夕短，  
已復至天旭。



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