

Preface

Born in Chaisang, Xunyang, Jiangxi province, at the end of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, Tao Yuanming (365–427) was, is, and perhaps will always be, a great poet and philosopher, and a symbol of classical Chinese naturalism.

Although there are just over one hundred of his works available today, Tao¹ has a holy status in the history of Chinese literature and is accredited “the poet of poets” because he was naturally inclined toward Nature² and would find himself chanting Nature since Nature was part of his life. While living to the rhythm of Nature, he was bestowed with maximum freedom, thus becoming a fundamentally beautiful, though simple, epitome of poetic dwelling on the earth. His complex of the *tianyuan*³, “returning to life’s essentials,” and “aspiration to the Peach-blossom Springs” have become spiritual symbols of traditional agricultural China and been built into the collective unconscious of the Chinese.

Tao’s works appeal to us as “Nature” itself does. His greatness lies in his integration with and immersion in “Nature.” His destiny, therefore, is interwoven with that of “Nature.”

Unfortunately, his glory has been dramatically eclipsed by the ever-rumbling industrialization, commercialization, urbanization, and the deterioration

¹Tao is used to refer to Tao Yuanming for the sake of convenience. Coincidentally, what is known as *Tao*, or the way, as in Taoism represented by Lao Tzu and Chuang Zi, is spelled the same as Tao as a surname. Therefore, to avoid confusion, *Tao* as a philosophical concept will be spelled as Dao and the philosophy of Dao as Daoism. Translator’s note.

²Nature with a capitalized N when in the middle of a sentence refers to Nature in the Chinese sense of the word, meaning the natural world and the so-of-itself in most cases. “Man and nature” is used hereinafter for discussions of quintessentially Western scholars’ contemplation on the relationship between man and the natural world; “Nature and man” is used for most Chinese scholars’ discussions on the relation in question, since, in classical Chinese philosophy and discourse, Nature almost always precedes man. Translator’s note.

³Tianyuan, literally translated as fields and gardens, refers to the country of rustic charm, Arcadian simplicity, and contentment. Tianyuan poetry, or farmstead poetry, is similar to English pastoral poetry in terms of aesthetic experience and idealized imagery, though *tianyuan* poetry is not about herding.

of “Nature” itself. As Nature suffers, Tao’s literary spirit also wanes. The early twenty-first century witnessed Tao’s death again, following his true death approximately 1600 years ago. Consequently, Tao has been reduced to a feeble and elusive specter.

Serge Moscovici (1925–), a contemporary French eco-critic, declares that “Nature” would be resurrected as a specter in the human world by the global ecological movement:

Nature for a time disappeared from our vision,
Hiding behind a word we rarely use.
Yet nature has resurrected,
Reminding us that it is still there,
And that lives all rely on it.
The reappearance of nature is no radiant presence,
But like a ghost returning to the human world,
And the naturalist and ecologist movement is becoming
A lingering specter on the Euro-American lands. (87)

He Lin (1902–1992), a Chinese philosopher, writes about Tao Yuanming equally poetically:

Nature, once internalized, radiates in our souls.
The tranquil Southern Mount as depicted by Tao Yuanming,
The Peach-blossom Springs as pursued by the fisherman of Wuling,
And all the landscapes in poems and paintings,
May be viewed as
Radiating Nature in souls. (112)

I attempt to interpret Tao Yuanming in a postmodern eco-critical context from multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives. It is my wish, and perhaps yours too, that the specter of Tao may rekindle a light for humanity in an era of suffocating smog and filthy water, a light that will help evoke a completely intact “Nature” in our minds and souls. That very Nature, in turn, is the real fountain-head of a truly beautiful human existence.

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