INTRODUCTION

By the end of the seventh century there were in existence four separate, though not independent biographies of T'ao Yüan-ming.[1] These biographies are extremely brief and by the standards of more recent times contain little precise factual information. It is, however, hardly worthwhile to quibble at the word 'biography'. They were intended to be records of the life of T'ao Yüan-ming, a man who played a virtually negligible part in the political history of his time. Thus for the compilers of these biographies his life was lacking in obvious material according to the prevailing concept of biographical writing which sought to present men in relation to political events. A literary biography of T'ao, who was primarily a poet and writer, was far beyond the bounds of the contemporary vision, even though one of his 'biographers' was Hsiao T'ung, the compiler of the earliest surviving general anthology of Chinese literature, in which literary genres were distinguished with some precision.

The question could be asked: why was T'ao Yüan-ming in these circumstances thought worthy of a biography at all? The answer probably is that his literary ability was always recognized and his personality always admired. Besides, he was a member of an important family that had, within the span of the dynasty under which he lived, produced one figure of major political importance in T'ao K'an (259–334). But, apart from recording the meagre details of his family connections and the minor appointments held or declined by T'ao Yüan-ming, the compilers of the biographies had to confine themselves to presenting a character sketch, for interest in the study and definition of character had already had a history of some three or four centuries by the fifth century in China. This character sketch, delineated by a series of anecdotes, was presented within a political frame, for the three biographies of T'ao, which are found in the dynastic histories, appear in the chapters on 'Recluses' (men who abstained or withdrew from an official career) in the respective works. For the family and appointment details some kind of official source may be presumed, but for the character anecdotes it seems to me probable that T'ao's own writings were in most cases the prime source.

[1] For a translation of the biography by Shen Yüeh with additional material from the other biographies, see vol. 2, pp. 170–74.

Before they were gathered into the histories, however, they had acquired a greater or less degree of exaggeration and had been sometimes set for the sake of verisimilitude in particular but doubtful contexts. If this view is correct, to use the anecdotal material of the biographies to provide a context for particular poems of T'ao is clearly a risky proceeding.

In sum, the biographies attempt to show T'ao Yüan-ming as following the reverse of a normal career, with a certain ambivalence as to whether his rejection of office was the result of inclination or of principle. This ambivalence is an accurate reflection of the attitudes which T'ao expresses in his own works. The great bulk of later studies of T'ao, however, have set the emphasis on the poet's adherence to principle and have tended to ignore his references to inclination. I shall give a great deal of attention throughout this study to the apparent contradiction, but for the moment I should like to continue the review of the material available for reconstructing the life of T'ao Yüan-ming.

These early brief biographies have almost no indication of date for the few events in T'ao's life, which they record. The poet has, however, from the twelfth century on been the subject of a number of chronologies (*nien-p'u*), the compilers of which have successively sought to place the events of his life and his individual works under definite years until in the most recent examples almost every poem and other piece in his collection have been given a date. This peculiarly Chinese form of presentation has an inherent tendency to over-precision, even where a great amount of detailed and varied source-material is available to the compiler. In a case like that of T'ao Yüan-ming, where most of the dates must be arrived at by deduction from generally small clues, even though the various compilers differ and dispute among themselves, a delusive appearance emerges that certainty is possible once all the correct arguments are discovered. My own repeated contention is that this is false and I believe that it may be of some service to T'ao Yüan-ming studies to demonstrate the weakness of many accepted arguments and the probable impossibility in many cases of achieving any definiteness of date.

In the twentieth century under Western influence a number of attempts have been made by Chinese and Japanese scholars to write fuller and more modern biographies of T'ao Yüan-ming, by using his writings as basic material, like the chronologists before them, but seeking to fit them into a more detailed presentation of the historical context of his time. All are relatively failures as biographies. This is not a reflection on the competence of the writers, but simply confirmation of the fact that resources for a satisfactory biography do not exist. There is, in fact, not one contemporary political event to which T'ao refers clearly and positively in the whole of his surviving writings. Since much of his poetry and prose tend towards a generalized expression of principles and attitudes (this is of course in no way unique to him), very often conveyed by reference to persons of earlier times, any relation of that expression to contemporary events must be highly specula-

tive. Further, when one considers that a suitably cautious attitude to the problem of dating some of his most important works will have to allow a margin of ten and sometimes as much as twenty years and more, the essential hopelessness of the biographical task has to be admitted.

The fitting of the contemporary historical frame about T'ao's works can in the circumstances of his own silence also be deceptive in its encouragement of unfounded beliefs that he would have taken such and such a position on account of family connection, territorial location and the like. One of the overriding assumptions is that because of his great-grandfather T'ao K'an's part in the re-establishment of the Chin dynasty south of the Yangtze after the loss of the north to foreign invasion, his loyalty to the dynasty would have been such that he must entertain an active opposition to Liu Yü who supplanted the Chin with his own dynasty of Sung in 420. The belief in a fiercely-maintained opposition to Liu Yü during his progress to supreme power as well as after his assumption of it has inculcated a widely-held view that much of T'ao's writing is full of innuendo against Liu Yü and this has in turn been used to determine the dates of many of T'ao's works. The issue has thus to be discussed repeatedly in considering the dating and possible political reference of individual pieces.

An unwillingness to serve two dynasties would not have been unusual for a man in T'ao's position and with his principles. By 420 the last official post which he had accepted was fifteen years in the past and he had undoubtedly become by this time a resolute recluse. The earliest of the biographers, Shen Yüeh, who mentions his unwillingness to serve the Sung, because of his great-grandfather's status under the Chin, does not imply that it was due to other than propriety and principle, but many critics of all periods, often one suspects with some impulse from the bitter politics of their own time, have been set on turning T'ao into a concealed political activist.

Many details of the history of the period through which T'ao lived find mention in my commentaries to individual works, but I shall give a brief outline of its main events here. Before doing so, however, I should like to remark on a feature of the poet himself, one, it is true, that he shares with many other Chinese poets, the creation of the self-image. His outstanding achievement in this regard explains, I think, why he was always so much admired as a personality among later Chinese writers. Because his self-image was so perfect a literary creation, it was easy for others to identify themselves with it. T'ao Yüan-ming can be seen as a man who effectively created his own legend during his own lifetime. There is eloquent testimony to this in the only contemporary piece of writing about him, the funeral elegy[2] by his friend Yen Yen-chih, which describes him in a manner very like that of his own self-descriptions.

T'ao Yüan-ming succeeded in his desire to withdraw from the world, while

[2] Translated on pp. 243–49.

projecting for the world a readily accepted image of himself. I am very far from suggesting any element of insincerity in this. Such a suggestion in the case of a man whom the Chinese have always admired for the purity of his ideals would be of the nature of blasphemy. Simply, a man can never be entirely one with his dramatization of himself, for this would be to ignore the element of art. In so great a poet as T'ao the element of art must be allowed to be considerable. Again, this is not to impute to T'ao a large and humourless conceit. Self-depreciation and to some degree self-mockery are prominent in the forming of his self-image. These are indeed features which his example fostered in the stance of many later Chinese poets. They were perhaps also traits affected by a man of deep seriousness, though they may sometimes have deceived some of his acquaintances. One receives generally an impression from his own writings very different from the anecdotes related in the early biographies, where his own ironic poses have become caricatured and distorted.

It might be questioned whether an attempt to penetrate behind T'ao's self-image is likely to achieve much success or is even desirable. The true quality of T'ao Yüan-ming, which Chinese and Japanese have admired through the centuries, is an artistic truth which resides in his works, for all that the author seems so strongly to reveal his personality. It is the effectiveness of his self-image which makes T'ao the first of the poets of China who cannot fail to appear in any listing. Not only does he set the seal on the early centuries of development in Chinese poetry and handle the instrument which they had forged with a perfect simplicity and grace, but he is the prince of hermits. Hermitage is the necessary eccentric and individual face that at least until very recent times China, with its endlessly devoted pursuit of a conforming society, seemed forced to tolerate. In T'ao, the individuality is much greater than the eccentricity (again, the emphasis to some degree on eccentricity in the anecdotes of the early biographies makes me suspect caricature and vulgarization).

The individuality of T'ao Yüan-ming lets us believe that we can see a little beyond his self-image to a man with whom we of a very different age and civilization can still find affinities. To put my own discernment of him in a single sentence: I see him as a man who, with a vital sense of moral values but despairing utterly of contemporary society, sought for a satisfying explanation of his finite existence. T'ao was not, it seems to me, sustained by any convinced religious or mystical belief. His solution to the meaning of existence which he held to be good was a poetic one that left him still haunted by death, not perhaps so much his own death but of those he loved, so much harder to contemplate and accept.

To speak of T'ao in this way is to take him out of his context and make him a universal figure. While he certainly has as great possibilities for universality as any ancient Chinese poet, he depends on the colour of his locality and his age. First then, the historical context may be briefly sketched with a

repetition of the caveat that since nowhere does T'ao make any direct reference to political events occurring during the period when almost all of his surviving works were written, i.e. 400–427, any connecting of the poet with those events must be speculative.

If the traditional date of T'ao's birth (365) is correct — and the weight of such evidence as there is points to its being so —, the poetic record of his life substantially begins from his thirty-sixth year. This is not necessarily unusually late, since only a very few of the poems of the great T'ang poet Tu Fu, who left a very large collection, date from before his fortieth year. Tu Fu at least was given to reminiscence, but T'ao Yüan-ming affords us very little by way of recall of the first thirty-five years of his life. We know of the early death of his father,[3] his taking up of an appointment when he was approaching his thirtieth year, which is usually connected with the post of Provincial Libationer mentioned in the biographies,[4] and the death of his first wife soon after.[5] The biographies state that he very soon gave up his first appointment. In 400 we find him returning from the capital Chien-k'ang (modern Nanking)[6] and it is my belief that he had been away from his home near Hsün-yang (modern Kiukiang) for a period of six years (since 395).[7]

In the year following that in which I believe T'ao left home, i.e. 396, the Emperor Hsiao-wu was smothered by one of his concubines and was succeeded by his young son, who is known to history as the Emperor An. There existed at this time the classic situation of a tottering dynasty: at the court of Chien-k'ang a child-emperor in the hands of his uncle Ssu-ma Tao-tzu and the latter's son Ssu-ma Yüan-hsien; an imperial house doubtfully supported by the family of its maternal relatives, the Wangs, led by Wang Kung, elder brother of the dowager empress, and threatened by the uncertain loyalty of its military commanders and by the power of other great families. The first ten years of Emperor An's reign, which largely cover the period of T'ao's involvement in 'the world', were a time of shifting alliances and struggle among these groups with the added complication of a revolt, part popular, part religious in character.

The powerful families of the time were, beside the Wangs, the Huans, the Hsiehs and the Yins. The Huans under Huan Wen (312–73) had more than twenty years earlier come very near to overthrowing the dynasty and probably only Huan Wen's death had prevented this. During the next ten years power shifted to the Hsiehs, who then in turn began to decline. Now in 397 Huan Wen's son Hsüan, who appears to have been a man of culture and individual brilliance, was with Yin Chung-k'an, governor of the western province of Ching-chou with its capital at Chiang-ling (in modern Hupei).

[3] See Discussion of Biography, note 4, vol. 2, p. 177.
[4] See ibid., note 5, p. 178.
[5] See Additional Commentary to *Charge to My Son*, vol. 2, p. 24.
[6] See *Detained by Contrary Winds at Kuei-lin*, pp. 81–82.
[7] See Commentary to *Returning to My Old Home*, pp. 88–90.

Huan Hsüan was in fact back in his father's territory and had no doubt rallied many of his family's adherents. Ssu-ma Tao-tzu, apprehensive of his remaining in Chiang-ling, appointed him Governor of Kuang-chou, far to the south (seventh month, 398). Huan Hsüan accepted the appointment but did not go to his post. He had indeed formed an alliance with Yin Chung-k'an to make a bid for power, though Yin himself was no soldier. Wang Kung had also been drawn into the confederacy and had been invited to become its leader. Huan Hsüan, with Yin's commander Yang Ch'üan-ch'i, advanced down the Yangtze and captured the governor of Chiang-chou (T'ao Yüan-ming's home province with its capital at Hsün-yang) in the eighth month. Ssu-ma Yüan-hsien, however, managed to persuade Liu Lao-chih, one of Wang Kung's generals, to betray him and Wang was captured and executed. In the tenth month Huan Hsüan and Yin Chung-k'an made a new pact at Hsün-yang. At this point hostilities were temporarily ended with Huan Hsüan becoming Governor of Chiang-chou. In the next year (399) he went westwards and killed his confederate, Yin Chung-k'an. He now took over the governorship of Ching-chou also and was thus by the end of 399 in control of the western part of the country.

In the same year the revolt of Sun En had begun. Like the revolt of the Yellow Turbans at the end of the second century, it was connected with the magico-religious form of Taoism, the T'ien-shih Tao (The Way of the Heavenly Master) and drew in discontented peasants, brigands and pirates. It was not, however, a movement of purely popular character, but embraced many of the scholar and gentry class. Since Sun En's uncle, Sun T'ai, had connections with Ssu-ma Yüan-hsien, its leaders were also involved in the family and clique struggles of the time. The immediate outbreak seems to have been provoked by Ssu-ma Tao-tzu's putting to death Sun T'ai. Sun En fled to sea, but in the eleventh month of 399 made a surprise attack on K'uai-chi (modern Shao-hsing, Chekiang; the centre of the area which Ssu-ma Tao-tzu had as his principality). Eight neighbouring commanderies overthrew their officials and joined Sun En, who within a short period gathered a force said to number some hundreds of thousands. He established his base in K'uai-chi and styled himself 'General for Subduing the East'. The court in great alarm sent forces to suppress the revolt under the veteran general Liu Lao-chih and Hsieh Yen (the Hsiehs' landed interests were in this eastern region). The campaign against Sun En continued with swaying fortunes for a whole three years, but finally resulted in victory for the government forces. Sun En drowned himself in the third month of 403. One of Liu Lao-chih's commanders who particularly distinguished himself in the campaign was the future Sung emperor, Liu Yü.

Meanwhile, Huan Hsüan, after the outbreak of the revolt, sent a number of memorials to the court, asking leave to bring his troops east to protect the capital. The court, justifiably suspicious that he had larger designs, tried to prevent his coming. He, nevertheless, continued to extend his power down

the Yangtze valley, and when Liu Lao-chih, who was ordered to proceed against him in 402, reached an understanding with him, opposition crumbled and Chien-k'ang fell. Ssu-ma Tao-tzu and Ssu-ma Yüan-hsien were killed, and in the twelfth month of 403 Huan Hsüan proclaimed himself Emperor of a new Ch'u dynasty and the Chin Emperor An was removed as a prisoner to Hsün-yang. Almost immediately there was a new rallying of forces against Huan Hsüan; among the leaders were Liu Yü and Liu Ching-hsüan, son of Liu Lao-chih who by now had committed suicide. Huan Hsüan was routed in the third month of 404 and killed two months later. Emperor An was restored to his throne in the third month of 405.

In most of these years of violence and treachery we have only the briefest glimpses of T'ao Yüan-ming, and the indications of his movements come largely from the titles of a small number of poems. He first comes into view in the fifth month of 400, returning home from Chien-k'ang after an absence, in my opinion, of six years. What he had been doing in these six years and what part, if any, he had taken in the events sketched above cannot be known. Probably the most that can be said is that his experiences during this absence from home had reinforced his natural inclination to keep apart from the world.

For a while longer, however, he was to remain in it. He had returned home to Huan Hsüan's territory and the next indication of his movements shows him going back to service in Chiang-ling in the seventh month of 401[8], so that he must have been by 401 holding some post under Huan Hsüan. This would presumably make him in some way an adherent of Huan, but there is nothing but speculation to make him an intimate adherent. His grandfather Meng Chia, of whom he himself wrote a biography, had been on the staff of Huan Wen. Apart from this link, the T'aos were a western family so that an element of local loyalty might be argued. But from the poet there is silence; he merely once again records his dislike of his service as alien to his nature.

It can be deduced with fair probability that in the winter of 401 his mother died[9] and T'ao retired to his home to mourn for her during the years 402–403 and into 404. In these years he begins to live as a farmer, 'ploughing with his own hand' and to express his recluse ideals. He complains greatly of poverty and this is his excuse for deserting his ideals and going out once more into the world. During the earlier half of 405 we find him serving on the staffs of two of the generals who had put down Huan Hsüan and restored Emperor An[10]. He had in some sense changed sides, but one is groping in such darkness in this matter that it is impossible to give any definition to this statement. One of the generals whom he briefly served was Liu Yü, at whom many commentators believe T'ao later to have directed secret violent condemnation. Then in

[8] See *Written in the Seventh Month of the Year Hsin-ch'ou*, p. 83.
[9] See Commentary of *In Sacrifice for My Sister Madame Ch'eng*, p. 236.
[10] See Commentaries to *Written in the Third Month of the Year I-ssu*, p. 87 and *Written when Passing through Ch'ü-o*, pp. 80–81.

the later months of 405 came the immortal episode of his magistracy at P'eng-tse, which in the version of the biographies became an ever-recurring reference in later Chinese literature. In T'ao's own somewhat different version in the preface to *Return Home!*[11] we come as near to a plain statement in regard to one of his excursions into the world as we find anywhere in his works, but even here the clarity is only relative.

T'ao has indeed left us with frustration. For however much one insists that the problem of his relation to the events of these years is insoluble, it continues to gnaw at us like an aching tooth, because while he tells us nothing about external events, he tells us so much about his own feelings. In the recording of these feelings there is, as already said, an ambivalence. There is an insistence that involvement in the world is against his nature and only for the sake of his belly. This, we can sense, was a clear psychological truth and we might even imagine that there would have been no age when T'ao would not have despaired of existing society. Yet also it seems that he felt a need to make it a moral decision, that he must feel that he was following a morally justified course as well as the bidding of his own nature.[12] This moral imperative came from a sense of family and social obligation.

There is little doubt of T'ao Yüan-ming's pride in his family, which carried him to the extent of accepting, if not actually himself fabricating a great lineage for the T'aos[13]. Ch'en Yin-k'o, whose historical researches led him to theorize about a number of individual works of T'ao Yüan-ming, maintained that T'ao K'an was not a Han Chinese but belonged to the Hsi people.[14] Whether or not one believes his evidence strong enough to sustain this conclusion, it seems that the T'aos of Ch'ai-sang came to prominence only with T'ao K'an. Their wealth and power were probably greatest in T'ao K'an's lifetime, but perhaps far from insignificant in that of T'ao Yüan-ming, when references to the T'aos are few and their position and possessions cannot be estimated.

Even if it were true that T'ao K'an was non-Han, his poet-descendant was certainly fully absorbed into Han culture and his social attitude was essentially 'Confucian'. The man of Confucian training had a duty of service. Admiration for the noble recluse had also grown within a Confucian setting; withdrawal required the rejection of 'taking service' and was hardly meaningful without it. Thus, for T'ao, in life there must have been a conflict of duty and desire, just as in his art hermitage needed to be set in a context of adversity. It is possible to understand the symbolic terms of his art by tracing its literary sources, but our inability to discover the facts of his political involvement leaves us with an imperfect understanding of the man.

After his return home from P'eng-tse at the end of 405, T'ao remained in

[11] See pp. 191–92.
[12] See the series *Drinking Wine* and its Commentary, pp. 95–106.
[13] See *Charge to My Son*, pp. 26–29.
[14] '*Wei shu Ssu-ma Jui chuan* Chiang-tung min-tsu t'iao shih-cheng chi t'ui-lun', pp. 8–9.

retirement for the last twenty or so years of his life. In all this time it seems that he did not seek office even for the sake of his belly. According to the statement of his friend Yen Yen-chih's funeral elegy, he was summoned to a central government post, presumably on account of his literary reputation, but this he declined on a plea of sickness (which might have been actual). Taking his word that he only served from economic necessity, we could conclude that his circumstances had improved after 405. Or his decision might be seen as political. In the years from 405 until his accession to the imperial dignity in 420, Liu Yü moved steadily towards his goal by the removal of rivals and by the path, attempted by Huan Wen before him, of the recovery of lost Chinese territory. In the eighth month of 417 Liu Yü's northern expedition recovered Ch'ang-an (it was held only for a little more than a year).

In many of the poems which can be dated with certainty in this later period of his life he writes of farming and his personal participation in it. The actuality need not be doubted, though it would be foolish to think of him as a peasant. Nevertheless, almost all T'ao's references to farming, like his references to poverty, have symbolic values. The recluse, having rejected 'riches and honour' had to embrace an opposite 'poverty and humble position'. A scholar-gentleman who cast away his natural career of public office might find many ancient precedents for demoting himself from the first rank in society to the second rank of the farmer. Yet however indigent a member of the gentry T'ao was at any point in the last two decades of his life, he remained an intimate of the officials of Hsün-yang. This fact may at the same time provide something of a denial of his rejection of office being strongly politically motivated. For many of these officials before 420 would have been adherents of Liu Yü, and after of course in the service of Sung.

In the last twenty or so years of his life, I believe that T'ao was largely secure inwardly and outwardly. His withdrawn position was accepted by the holders of power, who saw no challenge in it. The moral conflict over the rightness of such a position which seems to have been strong in his mind in the years up to 405 seems to have been resolved. He had reached a point of detachment where in Yen Yen-chih's words 'he disregarded affairs'. What moved him most deeply was the attempt to understand 'this single life'. T'ao is fairly described as a philosophical poet and this fact has attracted some number of studies of his thought in the context of the intellectual history of the period. Such attempts, it seems to me, are often liable to forget the difference between a poet and a philosopher. The emotional perception and artistic presentation of truth of the poet are of a kind other than the argument and logical exposition of the philosopher. Even when he commits himself to a defined belief, the poet's defence of the position employs different tactics; when he pronounces a new understanding, it is not disciples that he invites.

The period following the collapse of the Han empire in the latter half of the second century is marked by a tendency towards modes of thought in which

the personal existence of the individual as opposed to his social relationships assumed a greater importance. This can be psychologically explained by the fragmentation of state power and the insecurity of public life, which were accompanied by a breakdown in Confucian values. This breakdown should perhaps be called only comparative. For although in this period forms of philosophical and religious Taoism are conspicuous and Buddhism for the first time strongly engages the attention of the Chinese intellectual world, the Confucian writings remain generally closely known and their influence remains potent.

In T'ao's works wide reference to Confucian books and to the philosophical texts of Taoism, *Chuang-tzu*, *Lao-tzu* and *Lieh-tzu* (a work that it has been claimed was a 'forgery' of the beginning of the fourth century) may be found. An acceptance of Confucian social ideas stands beside a Taoist conception of Nature which *is* of itself, unchangeable by human actions and desires. The immortality-seeking of religious Taoism is positively rejected; to Buddhism there is no apparent allusion. Nevertheless, living as he did in close proximity to Hui-yüan, one of the most important Buddhist teachers of the time, and certainly knowing some of the latter's lay disciples, T'ao could not have been ignorant of Buddhist ideas and in particular the arguments then in progress about the immortality of souls and karmic retribution. Quite obviously he would have rejected them as he rejected Taoist ideas of the prolongation of physical existence. But all T'ao's philosophical ideas are rendered through the medium of his poetry and need to be apprehended as poetry.

Because of the uncertainty of the dates of many of his works, it is not easy to pronounce on T'ao's literary career. But, while he adopted the stance of farmer-recluse in his last twenty-two years (which are the substantial part of the time from which most of his writings must come), he must have thought himself and been thought by others a man of letters. He had clearly a wide knowledge of literary and historical writing up to his own time and it would seem that he possessed a considerable library. How this was formed it is not possible to say, but the fact can cast doubt on the actuality of any extreme poverty. I believe that he came to see himself as a major figure in the literary tradition. He often takes up the themes of his predecessors as well as creating new departures of subject and manner. His poetry was the climax and perfection of a long period.