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978-0-521-10452-4 - T'ao Yuan-ming (AD365-427): His Works and their Meaning

A. R. Davis

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T'AO YÜAN-MING

HIS WORKS AND THEIR MEANING

Volume I Translation and Commentary

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T'ao Yüan-ming

(AD 365–427)

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A.R. DAVIS

Professor of Oriental Studies

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In memory of
G.H. and A.D.W.

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PREFACE

Personal lyric poetry — the description of private emotion — is the great strength of the Chinese poetic tradition. T'ao Yüan-ming (AD 365–427) was one of its first great exponents and a poet very greatly loved for the personality which he revealed in his writings by centuries of Chinese readers. Personal lyric poetry *was* the great achievement of T'ao Yüan-ming's life and one would hope that he himself was ultimately content with that achievement. For historical and sociological reasons, however, many Chinese seem to have been unwilling to leave him with this success alone but have wished to discover other goals and intentions in his work. As a result, I believe that they have introduced a measure of distortion into the understanding of his life and writings. Since I so often find myself at issue with their opinions, I have subtitled this study: *His Works and Their Meaning*.

So many of the problems in Chinese studies of T'ao Yüan-ming seem to me to have been created and also rendered insoluble by an insistence on treating the whole of his life and works in political terms. He is commonly called 'T'ao the Hermit' and his hermitage — his withdrawal and continuance in retirement from public life — has been seen as a deliberate political act, while his writings are thought to be continuing political criticism. This almost universal attitude is mistaken. T'ao was certainly a man concerned with personal morality, but with very little apparent interest in immediate public affairs. Such a position became increasingly unfamiliar and even unintelligible in the 'Confucian' politico-literary scholar-official society which developed from the T'ang period (618–906) onwards. Thus Chinese scholarship from the Sung period (960–1279) approached this greatly beloved poet with its own vision and concluded that what was not apparent must lie hidden. The decipherment of T'ao's supposed cryptograms has continued until the present day.

My view is that such decipherment is founded on mistaken premises and its conclusions are generally erroneous. One would be happy if it were necessary merely to demonstrate the unsoundness of T'ao studies by a sufficient number of examples, even though the habit of political interpretation remains so deeply ingrained in living Chinese scholars that one might not hope to convince very many of them. Unfortunately the ground is not so easily cleared. The matter of political interpretation is interwoven with other problems. Most of T'ao's poetry and prose is personal in theme and

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treatment, but the extent of his surviving works is small when compared with later major writers, and the amount of reliable biographical information, apart from what can be derived from his own writings is nearly negligible. Since the Sung period Chinese scholars have been attempting to construct a year-by-year record of his life and to assign his works, few of which have clear and indisputable dates, to particular years.

These biographical and chronological studies have been generally penetrated and influenced by judgements of T'ao's presumed concealed political references. In general too, they have been marked by a desire to achieve a greater degree of precision than the evidence could possibly warrant so that many decisions have been reached on very tenuous grounds. Inevitably, there have been many varied opinions and contentious disagreements. Every new Chinese and Japanese study of the poet tends to review the previous arguments and to accept or reject this or that opinion. Fairly seldom is any new evidence adduced or new line of argumentation raised. In a case where many native scholars, some of considerable distinction, have so long debated without final conclusion, the foreign scholar might be inclined to turn away from the problems and concentrate his effort on the translation and interpretation of the poet.

Classical Chinese is, however, a language of generalized expression of which the understanding is to a great degree dependent on context so that confident translation is rarely possible without the translator having arrived at a reasonably complete and coherent view of the writer's circumstances and intention at the time of composition. The translation of T'ao Yüan-ming's works in many cases requires that the translator should resolve to his own satisfaction the problems which Chinese study of the poet has raised. This must involve him in the complexities of the arguments, and the need to establish his own position must burden his study with a great many 'workings' of which the translation is the 'answer'. These 'workings' are a considerable embarrassment, since they must be largely tedious for most readers outside the small circle of professional sinologists interested in T'ao Yüan-ming. I have therefore tried in this final version to divide my material for readers with differing needs.

This work on T'ao Yüan-ming has been taken up and put aside over the past twenty years. A first translation and examination of the problems was largely completed before I left Cambridge for Sydney in 1955. Since then I have several times revised the translations and rewritten and extended the commentaries. As the number of pages grew without an actual completion occurring and the time left by my growing department in Sydney and my own widening interests diminished, the problem of finally preparing the study for publication was magnified. To the continual encouragement of friends, like Donald Keene, George Weys and Greta Scott, who seem not to have lost faith in the ultimate appearance of the work I owe much. Very special thanks are due to my colleague Dr Agnes Stefanowska, who during the preparation

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of this final version has made me a very generous gift of her time by checking its many references.

When a book has suffered starting and stopping over two decades, it becomes virtually impossible to acknowledge appropriately and individually the help and kindness of all who at some moment gave something to it, colleagues, students, librarians and many others. As examples only of that help and kindness let me record the generosity of Hashikawa Tokio, who in 1954 begged a copy of his *T'ao-chi pan-pen yüan-liu k'ao* from a friend, when he no longer had one of his own; of Wang Shu-min, who at the time of the final revision sent me copies of all his articles on T'ao; and of John Lust of the Far Eastern section of the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, who, when I appeared at a most unpropitious moment, did his utmost to satisfy my needs.

In the pages which follow I take issue over and over with Chinese scholars of the past and the present so that I may seem often to cite them only to disagree with them. This is not deliberate malice on my part, but something inevitable in the nature of T'ao Yüan-ming studies. I want, however, to acknowledge fully that if I have been fortunate to add anything to these studies, it will have had its inception in something written by a Chinese or Japanese scholar, no matter whether I have finally accepted or rejected my initial guide.

After most of what appears here was written, Professor J.R. Hightower, whose interest in T'ao Yüan-ming spans an even longer period than my own, published his translation of all the poems with extensive comments. I believe that, as he kindly hoped in his preface, his publication has not made mine redundant, but it has not seemed to me necessary to lengthen the present work by spelling out our differences, since I had generally already made clear my reasons for rejecting the views of particular commentators that he might have followed.

My commentaries and notes contain extensive quotation from other Chinese texts for the sake of explaining allusion, presenting comparisons or otherwise providing background for T'ao Yüan-ming's works. In all cases I have elected to give my own translations, whether the originals have previously been translated into English or not, since in no other way could I have achieved uniformity of version. Naturally, I have consulted and benefited from existing translations and I acknowledge these by inclusion in the bibliography.

A.R.D.