

Taoist Doctrine in Tao Yuanming's Poetry

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Received 19 September 2016; accepted 25 September 2016

Published online 26 September 2016

Abstract

Tao Yuanming (365-427) remains a controversial figure when it comes to his literary tradition in his poetry. The present paper aims to explore the Taoist doctrine expressed in his poems. While focusing on the Taoist ideas of naturalness, harmony of man with nature, fusion of the virtual and the real, and ineffability of *Tao*, the paper examines how these ideas are reflected in Tao Yuanming's poetry. Three of his representative poems are closely analyzed in terms of their structures, themes, and imagery. The paper demonstrates that Tao Yuanming's poetry does embody the Taoist philosophy through their themes and artistic mood created.

Key words: Tao Yuanming; *Tao*; Taoism; *Yijing*; Man; Nature; Ineffability

Liu, Z. (2016). Taoist Doctrine in Tao Yuanming's Poetry. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 13(3), 1-6. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/8798>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8798>

INTRODUCTION

Although the dominant doctrine in Tao Yuanming's poetry remains controversial, most critics see him as a hybrid of Confucianism and Taoism (Guo, 1974, pp.146-178; Li, 1978, pp.161-162; Zhong, 1981, pp.75-81; Huang, 1983, p.42; Jing, 1991, pp.177-185; Wei, 1991, pp.48-49). Given this controversy, the purpose of the present paper is to explore the Taoist doctrine in Tao Yuanming's works. Three of Tao Yuanming's major poems will be examined

in terms of their structures, themes, and imagery. The explication de texte involves a thematic focus on the poet's Taoist view on man, society, and nature, and on how the idea of *Tao* helps create artistic mood in his poems. The question of inadequacy of language will be examined in terms of the ineffableness of *Tao*. This paper demonstrates that the major poems of Tao Yuanming are filled with the Taoist vision characterized by the harmony of man with nature and fusion of the finite and the infinite. This unity is best exemplified in the poet's admiration for returning to simplicity, naturalness, and non-action, which in turn account for the question of inadequacy of language.

1. DEFINITION OF TAO

To understand the relationship between Taoism and Tao Yuanming's view on man, society, and nature, we should, first of all, try to elaborate on the term *Tao*. It is generally believed that *Tao* with a metaphysical sense is attributed to *Tao Te Ching* and *Zhuangzi*, which are supposed to have been written by Laozi and *Zhuangzi* respectively.

Within the philosophical framework of Laozi and *Zhuangzi*, *Tao* is related to something eternal, primordial, spontaneous, nameless, formless, and invisible. It is the beginning of all things as well as the way in which things pursue their course. It is nonexistence, not in the sense of nothingness, but in the sense of not being any particular thing. It is also absolute and mystical. As Laozi says in *Tao Te Ching*:

There is a thing inherent and natural,
Which existed before heaven and earth.
Motionless and fathomless,
It stands alone and never changes,
It pervades everywhere and never becomes
exhausted.
It may be regarded as the Mother of the Universe.
I do not know its name.

If I am forced to give it a name,
I call it Tao, and I name it as supreme.
(Laozi, 1973, p.37)

The naturalness and spontaneity of *Tao* is described by Laozi as follows:

Man follows the laws of earth;
Earth follows the laws of heaven;
Heaven follows the laws of Tao;
Tao follows the laws of its intrinsic nature.
(Laozi, 1973, p.37)

In regard to the concept of *Tao*, Zhuangzi believes that it is the first leading principle that makes the universe into existence:

The Way has its reality and its signs but is without action or form. You can hand it down but you cannot receive it; you can get it but you cannot see it. It is its own source, its own root. Before Heaven and earth existed it was there, firm from the ancient times. It gave spirituality to the spirits and to God; it gave birth to Heaven and to the earth. (Zhuangzi, 1968, p.81)

According to Guo Xiang, the well-known annotator of *Zhuangzi*, the reality that the Way has is the non-reality, hence non-action. The signs that the Way has are not the constant signs, hence formless. These attributes of formlessness and intangibility of *Tao* indicate that *Tao* is immanent (Shu, 1980, p.207). The dominant notes of Taoism of Laozi and Zhuangzi are harmony of man with nature, fusion of the virtual and the real, and naturalness.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE POEMS

The first poem examined below reflects the Taoist principles. It is taken from one of Tao Yuanming's long poems entitled "Substance, Shadow, and Spirit." The dialogs between Substance, Shadow, and Spirit in the poem represent different approaches to life. As the third part of that long poem, Spirit's Solution has been hailed as one of the most revealing poems of Tao Yuanming's philosophical thinking (Lu, 1979, p.213).

Spirit's Solution

The Great Potter cannot intervene—
All creation thrives of itself.
That Man ranks with Earth and Heaven
Is it not because of me?
Though we belong to different orders,
Being alive, I am joined to you.
Bound together for good and ill
I cannot refuse to tell you what I know:
The Three August Ones were great saints
But where are they living today?
Though P'eng-tsu lasted a long time
He still had to go before he was ready.
Die old or die young, the death is the same,
Wise or stupid, there is no difference.
Drunk every day you may forget,
But won't it shorten your life span?

Doing good is always a joyous thing
But no one has to praise you for it.
Too much thinking harms my life;
Just surrender to the cycle of things,
Give yourself to the waves of the Great Change
Neither happy nor yet afraid.
And when it is time to go, then simply go
Without any unnecessary fuss.
(Hightower, 1970, pp.43-44)

The poem can be divided into four parts. In the first part (lines 1-4), Spirit, which represents the Taoist aspect of the poet, presents the idea of harmony of man with nature. Part two (lines 5-8), which serves as a transition, expresses Spirit's rationale for its dialog. In part three (lines 9-14), Spirit shows the fact that all men are mortal. The last part (lines 15-24) contains Spirit's Taoist philosophy, which urges Substance and Shadow to give up pleasure and personal effort and to follow the course of nature.

The first two lines of the poem indicate that the Great Potter does not intervene in the process of the growth of all creatures. All beings in nature are created in spontaneity and naturalness. They are all treated impartially, they men or women, animals or plants. The next two lines are a description of the unity of man with nature. The word "triad" (*san cai*) 三才 refers to Heaven, Earth, and Man. As a symbol of the poet, Spirit identifies himself with part of nature. The rhetorical question in these two lines suggests a positive answer to the question. Here, the universe is viewed as a hierarchically organized entity in which every part belongs to the whole. The unity of man with nature characterizes Taoism. In the next four lines, Spirit explains its reason to speak to Substance and Shadow. Although they are different in their identities, they are "bound together for good and ill."

In lines 9-14, Spirit argues that all men must die, and shows the examples of the "Three August Ones" and "P'eng-tsu." The Three August Ones are commonly referred to as Fu-xi, Shen-nong, and Huang-di, whereas P'eng-tsu was a man in the ancient time who enjoyed longevity, and was believed to have lived eight hundred years. Here the poet expresses the idea that death and life are an immanent reality, just like the cycling of the seasons. The Taoist vision of life and death is shown in these lines: "He still had to go before he was ready"; "die old or die young, the death is the same,/wise or stupid, there is no difference." To Taoists, death is the natural result of life, and life and death form a natural cycle. Any human attempt to avoid physical death is a violation of the principle of nature. As Zhuangzi says, "the way is without beginning or end, but things have their life and death—you cannot rely upon their fulfilment....Decay, growth, fullness, and emptiness end and begin again" (Zhuangzi, 1968, p.182). In other words, death and life are never-ceasing transformations. They are not an end or a beginning. The story about the death of Zhuangzi's wife

makes a telling example. When Zhuangzi's wife died, he was found sitting with his legs sprawled out, pounding on a tub and singing. When asked why, he replied:

But I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she has a body. Not only the time before she had a body, but the time before, she has a spirit....Now there's another change and she's dead. It's just like the progression of the four seasons, spring, summer, fall, winter. (Zhuangzi, 1968, p.192)

In the last ten lines, Spirit voices his solution to the question of life and death—following the course of nature. As all beings are born to be part of nature, they have to follow the natural order and surrender themselves to “the cycle of things.” The line “Drunk every day you may forgot” parallels with the line “when wine is offered, don't refuse” in the first part of “Substance, Shadow, and Spirit.” But drinking will not solve the problem of death. The two lines “Doing good is always a joyous thing/But no one has to praise you for it” question the idea of benevolence expressed by Shadow in “Do good, and your love will outlive you;/Surely this is worth your every effort” in part two of the long poem. The last six lines suggest the poet's acceptance of the limitations of human life, and his willingness to follow the order of nature. As he says: “Too much thinking harms my life”/ “Just surrender to the cycle of things” “Give yourself to the wave of the Great Change.” The words “*wei-yun*” 委运 or “the cycle of things” simply mean the natural order or a continuing process of which man is naturally a part. Hence, all these lines echo the Taoist idea of non-action or *wu-wei* which is also the essence of *Tao*. As a way of life, *Tao* indicates simplicity, tranquility, spontaneity, and above all, non-action (*wu-wei*). Just as Laozi remarks, “*Tao* is ever inactive, and yet there is nothing that it does not do.” “By non-action everything can be done” (Laozi, 1973, p.51, 63). “To act through inaction is called Heaven. To speak through inaction is called Virtue.” “Emptiness, stillness, limpidity, silence, inaction are the root of the ten thousand things” (Zhuangzi, 1968, p.127, 143). On the other hand, *wu-wei* is tantamount to a contracted form of *wei-wu-wei*, 为无为 “act non-action”. As Laozi states in *Tao Te Ching*, “Act non-action; undertake no undertaking; taste the tasteless.” (Laozi, 1973, p.78). A good example is the flow of water, which suggests both action and non-action. To put it simply, the flow of water itself is action, but its natural movement is not forced, and this “non-forced movement” characterizes non-action.

In terms of cosmology, Taoism values the harmony of man with nature. For example, when asked about the unity of man and Heaven (天), which is equivalent to the notion of nature in Chinese, Zhuangzi quotes Confucius, “Man exists because of Heaven, and Heaven too exists because of Heaven” (Zhuangzi, 1968, p.218). Talking about making things equal, Zhuangzi says, “Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand

things are one with me” (Zhuangzi, 1968, p.43). So to Taoist believers, the spontaneous rhythm of the primitive rural community and its natural operation with nature's cycle is their dream. Tao Yuanming describes such an ideal society in “The Peach Blossom Spring” (Hightower, 1970, pp.254-258). Laozi describes it as “a small state with few people” (Laozi, 1973, p.95). According to him, such a society should not be materialistic, not overly populated, and the people should have few desires. The fewer people there are, the less likely the people will hurt one another. Hence the freedom of the individual is obtainable. If freedom and sufficient means of livelihood are guaranteed, the people will be content with what they have. In short, simplicity, naturalness, and spontaneity are the major elements that characterize the Taoist view on man and society.

Tao Yuanming's poems at their best serve as a means of reflecting the primordial innocence, spontaneity, simplicity, and naturalness. As has been stated, one of the essential features of the Taoist vision in Tao Yuanming's poems is the harmony of man with nature achieved by returning to simplicity. Let us now turn to the first one in a series of five poems entitled “Returning to the Farm to Dwell.”

When I was young, I did not fit into the common mold,
By instinct, I love mountains and hills.
By error, I fell into this dusty net
And was gone from home for thirteen years.
A caged bird yearns for its native woods;
The fish in a pond recalls old mountain pool.
Now I shall clear the land at the edge of the southern wild,
And, clinging to simplicity, return to garden and field.
My house and land on a two-acre lot,
My thatched hut of eight or nine rooms—
Elms and willows shade the eaves back of the house,
Peach and plum trees stand in a row before the hall.
Lost in a haze is the distant village,
Where smoke hovers above the homes.
Dogs bark somewhere in deep lanes,
Cocks crow atop the mulberry trees.
My home is free from dust and care,
In a bare room there is leisure to spare.
Long a prisoner in a cage,
I am now able to come back to nature.
(Liu & Lo, 1975, p.52)

Written in five-character lines, this poem describes the background and the state of mind of Tao Yuanming's return to country life. The poem begins with the statement that the poet is ill-suited to the vulgar world and by nature he loves mountains and hills. This is followed by his regret at falling into the faddism and hypocrisy of the

common world which is likened to a "dusty net." Next, the poet voices his longing for a rustic life by comparing himself to a caged bird yearning for its native grove and a fish in the pond thinking of returning to its former pool. Then the poet goes on to describe the simple idyllic landscape after his return to the country, citing particular scenes that show his simple and natural way of life, such as the land he tills, the thatched-roofed house he lives in, the trees surrounding his house, and the dogs and the cocks with whom he lives. He then proudly says that his house is uncontaminated by the worldly dust, and now he can have his peace of mind. The conclusion of the poem serves as a summary of the idea that the poet wants to express here, namely, his dissatisfaction with the petty worldliness and his enjoyment of returning to rustic simplicity.

In terms of structure, the poem can be divided into three parts. The first part (lines 1-6) depicts the poet's regression into the past and his dream for returning to nature. In the second part (lines 7-18), the poet shifts to the description of the rustic agrarian life and his enthrallment of the landscape. The third part (lines 19-20), however, expresses the poet's delight in departing from the secular world and in coming back to the quiet life of the country. The poem is particularly noted for its structural contrasts in the first two and the last couplets, which help illuminate the tension in the poet's mind.

The Taoist theme of returning to simplicity and naturalness is evident throughout the poem. Apparently, the ideas of tranquility, non-action, simplicity, and naturalness are contrasted with worldliness, artificiality and unnaturalness. Hence in this poem we have the images of "the common mold," "the dusty net," "dust," "a cage," which represent human intervention and man-made constraints, and those of the landscape, such as hills, mountains, plants, and animals, which represent simplicity and naturalness. The poet's ideal of a harmony between man and nature is manifested in these lines in particular: "When I was young, I did not fit into the common mold/by instinct, I love mountains and hills." "Long a prisoner in a cage/I am now able to come back to nature." Here the poet sees the true state of man in simplistic and undisturbed conditions, like living in the ideal Taoist society in which man can coexist with the mountains, hills, animals, and plants. The poet's life is innocently real: He is working in the fields and resting in the rooms. His mind is free from all traces of artificial provisions and limitations. Thus there is no way of predicting how far his thinking can go. Embedded in the simple life is a body of spiritual power, which is free and strong.

Another important feature that shows the Taoist influence on Tao Yuanming's poems is the fusion of the virtual and the real and inadequacy of language in expressing this highest artistic mood. When the poet's idea grows out of his Taoist vision, words seem inadequate

to the full expression of the concept. The question of the paradoxical language is closely related to the idea of *Tao* in Laozi and Zhuangzi.

The poem that best reflects Tao Yuanming's Taoist view of fusion of the virtual and the real and inadequacy of language is the fifth poem in the series entitled "Drinking Wine." It reads as follows:

I built cottage among the habitations of men,
And yet there is no clamor of carriages and
horses.
You ask: "Sir, how can this be done?"
"A heart that is distant creates its own solitude."
I pluck chrysanthemums under the eastern hedge,
Then gaze afar towards the southern hills.
The mountains air is fresh at the dusk of day;
The flying birds in flocks return.
In these things there lies a deep meaning;
I want to tell it, but have forgotten the words.

(Liu, 1966, p.64)

As one of Tao Yuanming's most famous poems, this poem describes the simplicity and freedom, and the harmonious relationship between man and nature the poet finds in the idyllic life. Structurally, the poem can be interpreted in terms of three movements. The first movement (lines 1-4) consists of a question and an answer. The second movement (lines 5-8) provides further concrete scenes which suggest the poet's vision. The third movement (lines 9-10) is a summit of the whole poem. The poem opens with the poet's statement of being detached while making his home in the secular world. His distant vision makes his detachment possible. Then the poet goes on to say that he converses with nature through the things he sees around him. Finally, the poet tells us that there is a fundamental truth suggested in the scene, which somehow cannot be expressed in words.

The first couplet of the poem establishes a contrast between the poet's detachment and the worldliness. Though the poet builds his hut in a place where people live, there is "no clamor of carriages and horses," which are the symbols of commonplace and vulgarity that the poet distains. The next couplet is an expression of the poet's detachment. The poet attributes his ability to ignore the world while living in it to "a heart that is distant." With his detached heart, his place becomes remote. The expression "the heart that is distant" reminds us of the Taoist idea of "the fast of mind" (*xin zhai*) 心齋 and "sitting in forgetfulness" (*zuo wang*) 坐忘. In explaining "the fast of mind," Zhuangzi quotes Confucius:

Make your will be one! Don't listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don't listen to your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but spirit is empty and waits on all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind. (Zhuangzi, 1968, pp.57-58)

By "sitting in forgetfulness," Zhuangzi means the discarding of the knowledge and emptying of the mind, so

as to become one with the Infinite. As he quotes Yen Hui in his book:

I smash up my limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, cast off form, do away with understanding, and make myself identical with the Great Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by sitting down and forgetting everything. (Zhuangzi, 1968, p.90)

Thus, by discarding the worldly matters, the poet enters into a state of pure experience in which he is one with the universe. The next two well-known lines in the poem “I pluck chrysanthemums under the eastern hedge/ Then gaze afar towards the southern hills” actually serve as a good example of the harmony of man with nature. The contrasting images of the southern hills and the chrysanthemums are brought together to form a harmonious scene. While plucking the chrysanthemums and gazing afar towards the southern hills, the poet seems to connect himself to the infinity, thus creating a fusion between his feelings and the scene. Here is a good example of the Chinese aesthetic concept of “*yijing*” (意境) in poetry, which can be roughly defined as a perfect but ineffable artistic state resulting from the fusion of the author’s feelings and the scene, and the unity of the virtual and the real. The poet’s emotion is evoked by the scene around him. He projects his subjective feelings into the objective world so that the objects around appear to be fused with him. In so doing, the poet blends himself with the universe. In the next couplet, the poet continues to describe the natural scenery associated with the southern hills. The depiction of the mountain air and the birds flying home at sunset suggests the loveliness of nature on the one hand, and the return-to-nature theme on the other.

Obviously, the last couplet of the poem deserves a careful examination. While the poet is enjoying watching the natural scenery, he grasps certain truth which he cannot express in words. This ineffableness of truth in the poem is another classical example of “*yijing*” in Chinese poetry. The unity of the said and the unsaid in the poem leaves the reader much room for imagination as if the truth could only be perceived outside the text. In effect, this couplet is a good summary of the theme of simplicity, spontaneity, tranquility, and harmony of self and universe that the poet tries to convey in the poem. All these can be reduced to silence (*wu-yan*) 无言. The idea that “the deep meaning” or *Tao* cannot be found in words is reminiscent of the Taoist idea on words and meaning in particular.

In chapter one of *Tao Te Ching*, Laozi says, “The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao; The name that can be defined is not the unchanging name” (Laozi, 1973, p.11). However, the fact that Laozi has to use the word “Tao” in order to make this statement shows a paradox of language. Thus Laozi recognizes the necessity of language in another chapter of the book when he is describing “*Tao*”: “I do not know its name. If I am forced to give it a name, I call it Tao, and I name it as supreme” (Laozi, 1973, p.37).

Apparently, Laozi is not totally against using language. What he means here is nothing more than warning against the danger of taking words as permanent embodiments of reality. For him, the eternal *Tao* cannot be put into words. Therefore, they are inadequate for expressing *Tao* which is the all-embracing principle of everything, the ultimate reality.

Like Laozi, Zhuangzi also makes his comments on the inadequacy of language. For Zhuangzi, if one can grasp the truth through one’s intuitive power, there is no need for words. As he remarks:

The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you’ve gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you’ve gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you’ve gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him? (Zhuangzi, 1968, p.302)

Drawing an analogy between the trap, the snare, and language, Zhuangzi considers language as a makeshift device that can be discarded as soon as understanding is made. For Zhuangzi, things will be the same if we do not speak. As he says,

As long as I do not say anything about them (all things in the Heavenly Equality), they are a unity. But the unity and what I say about it has ceased to be a unity; what I say and the unity have ceased to be a unity. Therefore, I say, we must have no-words. (Zhuangzi, 1968, p.304)

Just as Laozi says, “Tao is ever inactive, and yet there is nothing that it does not do,” we might as well say that Tao Yuanming says nothing about “the deep meaning,” yet there is nothing that is unsaid. Beyond the boundaries of his language lies a region which words cannot illuminate. The important truth of life resides in that mystical space. However, it does not follow that the poet does not do anything. As we see, Tao Yuanming provides us with a milieu in which he and nature are fused as one, hence making what is ineffable deliberately unsaid and setting up a perfect example of “*yijing*” in classical Chinese poetry. As a result, the meaning of the whole poem extends beyond its literary sense, making the interpretation open-ended and inconclusive.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of the three major poems of Tao Yuanming shows that Taoism does find expression in his poetry. The poems under discussion echo the dominant principles of Taoism, most notably, the ideas of unity of man and nature, fusion of the virtual and the real, returning to naturalness and simplicity, non-action, and silence. Living in the dynasty of the Eastern Jin (317-420), a period which witnessed the drastic social turbulence and the prevalence of all kinds of philosophical and religious thoughts, Tao Yuanming voices his concern in the form of poetry.

Nevertheless, Tao Yuanming's belief in Taoist principles is by no means a total rejection of the world and its activity. Rather, it is a form of self-realization. As some critics have pointed out, although Tao Yuanming renounced his political ambitions in his pursuit of *Tao*, he did not really abandon the world of man (Chang, 1986, p.41). What he did achieve was to become a man of high moral virtue. By returning to nature, he attains an inner peace, reaches to a higher level of consciousness, and perfects himself through self-realization.

The unique artistic state created by Tao Yuanming's poems evinces purity, simplicity, harmony, and naturalness, which are the natural reflections of his mind. All these qualities represent the highest bliss of life according to Taoism. These achievements not only make the beauty of Tao Yuanming's poem unique, but also place him among the best poets in Chinese literature.

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