

TAO Yuanming

Táo Yuānmíng 陶淵明

365–427 CE Jin period Poet

Tao Yuanming was one of the most eminent of pre-Tang poets, effortlessly blending poetic expression with the Confucian and Daoist ideals of simplicity. He was a recluse who rejected the life of the court in favor of that of the country; his poetry exhibits a great concern for the small delights of everyday life. A little over a hundred of his poems survive.

One of the foremost poets of the Jin period (265–420 CE) of the Southern and Northern Dynasties (220–589), Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 or Tao, also known as Tao Qian, was a recluse, preferring rustic settings to courtly splendor and fineries. He was born in Jiujiang in Jiangxi Province to a family that had long served the emperors but had fallen into poverty.

Trained as a scholar-official, Tao was given various minor posts at court, but he could not bring himself to agree with the way things were done by his superiors; he was known for being outspoken and critical. When he lost his sister to an illness, his priorities changed, and at the age of 30, he resigned his post, sold his house, and retreated to the country to do those things that he deemed important in his life—farming and writing poetry—stating famously that he would not humble himself for a few measures of grain. (The salaries of court officials were calculated in measurements of grain.)

At court he saw himself as a caged bird or as a fish in

a small, artificial garden pond. During this period of seclusion a theme emerged in his poetry that would define it: bucolic ease. Linguistically he abandoned all things courtly and expunged from his verse all artificially ornate expressions that represented the grave excesses of a life rooted in the rituals and concerns of the court. He chose instead to write about simple pastoral pleasures, such as drinking or appreciating rural landscapes, developing an austere and simple style that reflected the essence of his rural life.

Perhaps in an effort to describe the peace and tranquility he had achieved by escaping from the constraints of the court, he wrote his renowned *Peach Blossom Spring* (*Tao Hua Yuan*, 桃花源記), a utopian description of pastoral life in which the virtues of living harmoniously with nature and with fellow human beings are extolled. The story tells of a fisherman who drifts along a stream in his boat and finds himself in an enchanted and unknown valley, where the inhabitants know nothing of the outside world's ills and are concerned solely with living in harmony with nature. When the time comes for the fisherman to return home, he carefully marks his path so that he might visit the valley again, but when he tries to find it he fails; the charmed place is lost to him, and he must live the rest of his life with the knowledge that he briefly lived in a paradisiacal place to which he can never again return.

Tao died on his farm, which he had made into his own utopia. Tao Yuanming is not remembered for his erudition, but rather for his poems that are so intimate and so well crafted that they become perfected reflections on



***Tao Yuanming Returning to Seclusion*, a Chinese handscroll painting on silk, from the late Northern Song Dynasty, early twelfth century. This handscroll is inscribed with a poem by the Song Dynasty scholar Li Peng (c. 1060–1110) titled “Returning Home”; it honors the fourth-century poet Tao Yuanming, also known as Tao Qian. FREER AND SACKLER GALLERIES OF WASHINGTON D.C.**

the individual as he seeks a place within the flow of history. This placing of the infinitesimal within the infinite marks his verses, making their appeal transcendent of both time and space.

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Further Reading

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