

# Reading Tao Yuanming/Tao Qian: “Twenty Poems about Drinking”

Massimo Verdicchio (University of Alberta)

## Abstract:

Tao Qian’s “Twenty Poems about Drinking” have been read as autobiography, and as being about his life as a recluse and about drinking. In my paper, I analyze the twenty poems as forming one narrative unit, in order to show that the subject of the poems is about poetry, just as much as it is about drinking, and I discuss their implications for a poetics of Tao Qian.

**Keywords:** Tao Qian, Hightower, Ashmore, poetry, wine

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Robert Ashmore’s study of Tao Qian (365?-427) has been instrumental in putting into perspective the life and work of this great Chinese poet, his indebtedness to the ancient past as well to his historical present, which has made it possible to capture the more subtle implications of his poetry. Most of all, as the title of his book indicates, *The Transport of Reading*, he has drawn attention to the implications of “reading” as “a mode of transport” not only to better understand Tao Qian but also to determine how reading had an impact on his poetry: “how Tao Qian created a distinctive and original poetics out of the materials provided to him by traditions about text and reading” (Ashmore 4). His approach is for the most part historical but it provides a useful background to place Tao Qian’s poetry into perspective and to eliminate many of the misconceptions and hypotheses that have been made on his account.

In this essay I would like to emphasize another aspect of “reading” on which Ashmore only touches indirectly since it is not his main focus. I mean a close reading of these poems to the extent that my non-existent knowledge of Chinese will allow me and “transport” me. I would like to read Tao Qian’s “Twenty poems about Drinking,”<sup>1</sup> as if they were English poems, aided by the translation and the com-

1 Hightower translates the poems as “Twenty Poems *after* Drinking” (my emphasis) because he believes that Tao could have only written them “after” drinking wine, which is understandable.

mentary of established sinologists as James Hightower (henceforward as H), whose translations seem to me to be the most adequate of those I have read, but I also take into account the translations and commentaries of Ashmore and A. R. Davies.

One of the key aspects of Tao Qian's poetry, which Ashmore points out, is the uncanny ability to write from the present, as if the poems were happening as we read them, as though Tao Qian were speaking directly to us, "in which the time of the poet's experience and the time of the poetic expression seem to merge in the spontaneous here-and-now of the reader who feels addressed by the poem" (Ashmore 15). In these instances, he writes, "it is often difficult to pin down whether the scene is to be read as reported from the present or as happening in an envisioned ideal future" (Ashmore 15). He draws our attention, in particular, to poem #14 which he cites as an example of "spontaneous conviviality":

Old friends who appreciate my ways,  
carrying a jug, have got together and come.  
Spreading brushwood mats, we sit beneath a pine,  
A few pours later, once again we're drunk.  
These geezers' talk is wild and lacking order;  
the sequence for filling up our cup is lost.  
No longer aware there's such a thing as "I" ...  
how should I know what things should be esteemed?  
Distantly, I lose track of where I'm going;  
in wine there is a depth of flavor.

For Ashmore, the poem is a version of the poetic theme of "summons to the recluse" where the poet invites the reader away from the comfortable life of the city to the conviviality and pleasures of the life of a recluse in the country. As he points out, Tao Qian's use of the solitary banquet is a version of this theme: "The text of the poem rather than being voiced as a summons into a realm alternatively of rustic or of cosmopolitan fellowship, becomes itself both the deferment and the potential site of recovery of a form of fellowship that exists from the outset solely in the experience of reading" (Ashmore 24)

Conviviality and wine drinking is not just tied to reading and interpreting texts, as Ashmore indicates, but also to writing poetry. We are told that drinking is something that the poet likes to do a lot, and references to him as a drunk are common in all commentaries, but he also likes to write poetry and it is in his poetry that we

know of his drinking. The act of writing poetry and drinking seem to go hand in hand, although for a critic like Hightower the two cannot occur together, but one must follow the other, and this is why he translates the title of these poems as “Twenty poems *after* drinking wine” (my emphasis). Understandably, one cannot write poetry while drunk, only after. However, Hightower’s distinction has greater implications. Although his reading is logical, it is also literal and non-poetic. While this is not generally the case with his commentary, his view presupposes a notion of poetry as biography, as imitation of life from which one can bridge the gulf between poetry and history.

If the twenty “Poems about drinking” appear to have been written at random and under the influence of wine there is nothing in these poems other than what Tao Chien tells us in the *Preface* or in the poems themselves to make us believe it. Although not all the twenty poems may be the original ones, commentators have acknowledged that at least the first and the last poem, as well as most of them, seem to fit well together. Tao Qian seems to have privileged a type of poetic composition in a series which may contain only a few poems or, as in this case, as many as twenty, or to combine poetry with prose. Whatever the case, it is misleading to privilege one poem from the series over the others, as is sometimes done when poem #5 is singled out from the rest. Even though all the poems may not be those originally intended, they have a continuity of their own and are easily read as a single narrative. There are only a couple of poems that do not fit within the narrative, which may very well be those that were added later. In this paper I will consider all twenty poems as constituting a whole narrative under the general theme of “Poems about Drinking” to show that these poems are about poetry, just as much as they are about drinking, and what this implies for a poetics of Tao Qian.

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### *Twenty poems about drinking*

*Preface.* In the Preface to the poems, Tao tells us that in the evening he has taken up drinking “some excellent wine” in the company of his shadow, “until suddenly I find myself drunk,” and he has written a few poems for “my own amusement.” He has “no more in mind than to provide a diversion” (H 124). Very understandably, Hightower views these statements as stating nothing more than what they say, that “they are the reflection of the moods of a man with few friends, time on his hands, and wine to drink” (H 125). However, these are not just the reflections of anyone but those of a great poet who has had a great impact on future gen-

erations of poets like Wang Wei, Li Po and Du Fu; a poet who while he may have idled away his time in drinking he also wrote a conspicuous amount of poetry to become one of the best known Chinese poets of all time, which is why we still read him today. If these poems were just the occasional musings of a drunk we would not be reading them today. Although Hightower knows that Tao is a great poet, he does not take him seriously as someone who can write on important issues of his times and can be careful about what he writes. Passing for a drunk is a technique of dissimulation that future poets like Li Po or Du Fu imitated, sometimes only too well, but their drinking did not stop them from writing great poetry. In these poets, drinking and writing poetry are closely related so that drinking and writing poetry are, sometimes, one and the same action. While there is no doubt that Tao Qian may have had a predilection for wine, drinking wine has another function in these poems which is not tied to drinking but is the distinctive trait, the essential quality, that differentiates the poet, or the sage, from the civil servant, the moralist from the ignorant masses. Tao Qian's "Poems about drinking" are poems about poetic truth because only in poetry and in drinking, truth is revealed.

## I

Decline and growth have no fixed time,  
Everyone gets his share of both:  
Master Shao of the melon patch  
Used to be Lord of Tungling,  
Cold weather alternates with hot  
And so it is with human lives ...  
Intelligent men understand  
And are beset no more with doubts.  
When chance brings them a jug of wine  
They take it gladly as night comes on.

The first poem is introductory and announces the theme of Change: how "decline and growth have no fixed time" and how everything and everyone is subject to change. The maxim stated in the first two lines is demonstrated by the example of "Master Shao of the melon patch" who was once the Lord of Tungling and now he grows melons. The point seems to be that although change is inevitable and natural like cold and hot weather, "Intelligent men understand" and accept change and are not distraught over it. The *topos* of the intelligent men recurs in some of the other poems and it refers to men like Tao Qian, that is, to poets and wise men who drink

wine. In later poems Tao explains more clearly who these men are but he concludes this first poem in very much the same way that Du Fu late poems do by radically shifting from the initial serious statement about the human predicament to a more lighthearted and mundane conclusion: “When chance brings them a jug of wine/ They take it gladly as night comes on.”<sup>2</sup> The poem ends with an invitation to drink and to forget.

For Hightower the poem “ends by recommending a stoical acceptance of fate ... tempered by recourse to the wine bottle” (H 125). Although this may well be true, it seems banal that a great poet would suggest that the bottle is the only solution, not only because it would take away from the wisdom of the sage, but also because it is not a solution. What we have here, instead, is an example of how everything is subject to change, even this poem, which can arbitrarily shift from the serious to the ludicrous, from poetry to drinking wine, or vice versa. Intelligent men understand and are not overly concerned by it. They reach for a jug of wine and find contentment in it. In other words, the poem performs in the form of allegory the very truth that it states. It shows that poetic language, like human life, is subject to change and that even meaning can change from one line to the next. This is the truth that intelligent men understand, namely, that there is no truth and that everything is subject to change, even poetry.

In this case, wine does not function as a means to forget the ups and downs of life, which would be the choice of the non-intelligent man, but implies acceptance of whatever life has to offer. If one is offered a jug of wine one should not refuse it; one should accept it gladly, especially “as night comes on.” If once we held a very important position, such as Lord of Tungling did, and now we find ourselves working in a melon patch we should not despair but accept what is given to us. Those who do not accept their condition because their aim remains higher, they are not only not being wise but theirs is an unrealistic attitude toward life, which makes them victims of Change. In reading poetry, as in drinking wine, one has to accept the fact that understanding means that there is nothing to understand.

Poem #2 seems to question Confucius’ teachings on doing good as opposed to evil, because good will not be rewarded. He quotes the examples of Po-i and Shu-ch’i, who, Hightower tells us, are “favorite examples of Confucian examples of unselfishness and loyalty” (H 126). They left home so that their brother could inherit the fief, and were also faithful to the “fallen” Shang dynasty but their unselfishness and loyalty went unrewarded. All the talk about good and evil, writes Tao, is only

2 For Du Fu’s shift from the poetic to the mundane see Verdicchio.

empty talk: “What’s the point of all the cant they talk?” In this regard, Hightower quotes from Tao’s “Lament for Gentlemen Born out of their Times” where the virtues of Po-i and Confucius’ disciple Yen Hui went similarly unrewarded: “*I fear that this teaching is no more than empty words*” (H 126, my emphasis). Tao Qian’s target seems to be Confucius’ wisdom that this behavior, even though apparently noble and virtuous, is entirely unrealistic. When the social order does not function according to his moral tenets the only choice and consolation for his disciples is to stand firm: “The gentleman is firm in adversity; the mean man in adversity goes all to pieces” (H 126). Steadfastness in adversity seems to be the only consolation for the unrealistic attitude of the Confucian gentleman.

Tao also mentions Jung Ch’i-ch’I, who as Hightower suggests, “[is not] an appropriate example of goodness unrewarded” (H127). He is mentioned in poem #11 as a sage: “Old Man Jung is said to have been a sage” who was “always hungry his whole life long.” In poem #2, his only consolation, and that of others, seems to be that their names will live a thousand years; in poem #11, Tao questions the value of this reward. Is future recognition worth a life of deprivation? What do we know when we are dead?:

They may have left behind an honored name  
But it cost a lifetime of deprivation.  
What do we know, once we are dead and gone? (#11)

Tao concludes poem #11 by saying that one should follow one’s heart and not follow accepted views. This last notion seems to draw the line between the examples of the Confucians Po-i and Shu-ch’I and the sage Jung Ch’i-ch’i. The former followed “accepted views,” those of Confucius, and were disappointed, the sage Jung did not. He was pure all his life and was happy in his condition, “plucking his lute and singing” (H 127). Whereas to be remembered may be for Po-i and Shu-ch’I a worthwhile reward, for Jung, who was happy in his condition, it did not matter if his name would be remembered in a thousand years. This is probably why Tao, in poem #2, and in poem #11, just mentions him by his surname, Jung. The last two lines of poem #2 only apply to those who follow Confucius’ doctrine and not to the sage. The Confucian adept must be “firm in adversity,” the sage does not know adversity. He lives in the present and accepts change. As Tao indicates in poem #1, the sage or the intelligent man is not beset by doubt, when chance brings him a jug of wine he takes it.

Poem # 3, as Hightower points, is certainly a reference to Chuang Tzu’s “The

world has lost the Way, and the Way has lost the world. World and Way have lost contact with one another. How can a man committed to the Way prosper in the world, and how can the world prosper in the Way?" (H 128) Tao's critique focuses on man's inability to follow his own impulses. He would rather follow the dictates of the majority and pursue the rewards offered by a social reputation and posthumous fame. Hightower believes with other commentators, and understandably so, that "the addiction to wine is incompatible with reputation." (128) However, it is unlikely that this is what Tao Qian has in mind here. The implication seems to be, rather, that those who care for a career do not care for themselves, for their "body," and are afraid to lose themselves in wine. As Tao writes in poem # 14, in wine the ego disappears: "Aware no more that our own 'I' exists."

Tao implies that what gives value to the body is "just this single life" which is as brief as a "lightning bolt." He questions the choice of those who strive for fame and fortune but do not appreciate life; those who follow the dictates of society instead of their instincts. The ego is what drives men to seek fame and to endure suffering for the reward of being remembered and appreciated by posterity. The ego is what drives us to excel and gives the illusion that we can prolong life through fame rather than be content with what we have and to share what we have in the company of friends. This is the Way which has been lost. Men have exchanged the Way for the world's way, for reputation and for social acceptance. They are intent on gaining fame and fortune without realizing that the world is only a "dream-illusion" (#8) and its promises are only empty words.

Poem #4 is probably one of those poems that were inserted later. It is usually read as an allegory of Tao Qian's condition who has sought shelter and refuge, "like a bird lost from the flock," far from home, with no support, until he finds shelter. The poem highlights the firmness and steadfastness of the pine that alone can provide shelter and unfailing shade, and alludes to the strength and fortitude of the recluse who has chosen not to pursue fame, who is alone and content with himself. The symbol of the lonely pine, to which Tao Qian recurs often throughout these poems, is stripped of its foliage and of everything except the steadfastness of its resolve. The image of the bird "lost from the flock" alludes to those who, like Tao, have made a similar resolve to move away from the flock, and who finally find shelter with a pine, a "resting place."

The poem is also this resting place. Once the Classics and the Way can no longer be relied on, the only refuge for those who seek shelter will be Tao's poetry for centuries to come: "And in a thousand years will never leave."

## V

I built my hut beside a traveled road  
 Yet hear no noise of passing carts and horses.  
 You would like to know how it is done?  
 With the mind detached, one's place becomes remote.  
 Picking chrysanthemums by the eastern hedge  
 I catch sight of the distant southern hills:  
 The mountain air is lovely as the sun sets  
 And flocks of flying birds return together.  
 In these things is a fundamental truth  
 I would like to tell, but lack the words.

The fifth poem is the one most often quoted and contains in a few lines Tao's life-philosophy: "You would like to know how it is done?" For Hightower, "It conveys admirably the detachment and repose of the great Recluse who makes his home among men yet remains uncontaminated by the world" (H 130). The poem defines seclusion as a state of mind. Even in a crowd the poet can be a recluse and be a thousand miles away from where he is. The simple act of gathering chrysanthemums can transport him far away to the southern hills. One can almost smell the mountain air which is lovely when the sun sets and the birds return together to the nest. This fundamental truth is very simple and cannot be expressed in words but not because of any failure on the poet's part. This is a truth that all poetry conveys and every sympathetic reader understands it. It is not a doctrine, like Confucius', written in words that men learn by heart in order to be guided by them. It is a poetic truth that cannot be taught but only intuited.

Poem #6 brings up the difficulty of telling right from wrong, especially when times are bad and people praise or blame according to what is believed by the majority. This is not the case with the intelligent man, or with the "men of understanding," who stand alone and are contemptuous of the vulgar crowd. These men know the difficulty of telling right from wrong and abstain from passing judgment. They withdraw from the world like Huang and Ch'i rather than accept compromise. Hightower adds a sarcastic note to this example saying that the intelligent man "would be as little worried by political vicissitudes as by the changes of fortune that plague the individual; he simply prefers to do his drinking in retirement." (H 133)

Hightower's translation of poem #7 is somewhat ominous. He reads it to imply that Tao collects chrysanthemums and floats them in wine "to prolong his life and also to forget death, suggesting a certain lack of confidence in the efficacy of his

concoction” (H 134). But in his view, Tao drinks chrysanthemum wine not so much to prolong life but, on the contrary, to leave it: “To strengthen my resolve to leave the world.” Other versions of this poem do not imply a sense of gloom and doom but refer to the forgetfulness that drinking chrysanthemum wine brings: it will help him leave “behind all worldly emotions” (Lily Pao-Hu Chang); the wine “Will free my mind from all the worldly powers” (Wang Rongpei), or the “luscious wine” will help him drift farther from the world: “The farther I drifted from the world” (Tan Shilin). The poet’s resolve to leave the world is not meant literally, in a physical sense, but in the sense that the wine will help him leave the social world for the world of a recluse or, as he puts it, for a new life.

Poem #8 may be another of those poems like poem #4 that was inserted later. It employs the symbol of the pine and makes it clear that it stands for the poet whose true nature and essence lies hidden. No one is aware of the “hidden beauty” of the pine until all the other trees are killed by the frost and it is the only one left standing. The poet, whose symbol is the pine, is described lifting a jug of wine and gazing into the distance, just as we saw in poem #5 where “I catch sight of the distant southern hills.” Like the pine, the poet is born in the “midst of dream-illusion” and it is only when these are dispersed that the loftiness of the poet is revealed. His knowledge that the world is but a “dream-illusion,” that nothing is real, or of everlasting value, makes the poet choose to stand alone rather than strive to “submit to dusty bonds?” or to seek fame and fortune that are illusory.

In poem #9 we get an insight in what Tao Qian means by “wine.” When a farmer with a heart of gold comes with a jug of wine to try to persuade him, or to bribe him, to return to the world he has rejected, he refuses it. This wine is not the wine of friendship or the wine that distinguishes the intelligent man from the gentleman, the civil servant. This is the wine of compromise and conformity. This wine is meant to distract him from himself and from his chosen Way, and to bring him back to the fold. The poet is “out of tune” with the world and it would be foolish to go against his inclinations: “To go against oneself is a real mistake.” No amount of wine could make him do that. For him, there is no turning back. Once the farmer has understood, Tao can sit down with him and drink the wine in friendship and as a token of hospitality.

Poem # 10 follows up on the previous poem and tells of when the poet went against his inclinations and took a “trip” to the social world forced by “hunger” for fame and reputation. However, he realized that it was not worth the money and the effort, and returned home.

Poem # 11 targets Confucians, once again, with the examples of Master Yen,

who was Confucius's favorite disciple (H 140) and Old Man Jung, the sage who was mentioned in poem #2. Yen is an example of the man who seeks honor and fame, Jung was always hungry. Was their life of deprivation worth the renown they received after death? Since we don't know what happens when we die, for Tao it is best to follow one's heart. We can indulge ourselves all we want but when the moment to die comes we cannot take it with us. When we die we all go the same way, naked. A man should think for himself and not follow "accepted views," or follow others.

Poem #12 gives the examples of Chang Chang-kung and Yang Chung-li who served in office but eventually resigned. Yang Chung-li seems to have resigned and then gone back. Tao's lesson is that when we have decided to leave the life of an official we should no longer have second thoughts. This is a lesson that Tao Qian learned himself. All talk is idle, one must follow the dictates of one's heart: "Let's have no more of all this pointless talk! / I prefer to follow my own course."

Poem # 13 occupies a key position within the series of twenty poems. Here Tao explains the inner conflicts that assail him from time to time, to which he alluded in the previous poem. In this allegory the poet acknowledges his two conflicting selves: one is the moralist who does not drink, the other drinks alone too much. One feels that he ought to have a career, make money and support his family, the other feels he ought to follow his heart and his inclinations, and stand firm in his resolve. These two conflicting and contrasting selves laugh at each other but they don't understand each other. The conventional and career bound self appears very stupid, while the drunken self is wiser because he is detached. The poem is an example of what Tao in poem #5 called the fundamental truth of being "detached," of taking one's distance, that is, the ability of the intelligent man to double himself, to see both himself and his other.

As Tao indicates throughout these poems this characteristic is associated with drinking wine, with being drunk, because only in this state one can be detached and understand that the world is only a dream-illusion. In the last two lines of the poem, the drunken guest seems to have gained the upper hand over the conventional self. Tao's advice to the drunken self is to light the candles when the sun goes down." As Hightower points out this is an invitation to drinking. "Light the candles' amounts to saying: "Keep on drinking" (H 144).

Poem # 14 explores the importance of drinking as the poet sits by the pine tree drinking with his friends, talking and drinking. Drinking wine abolishes all egos and all hierarchies. There are no more differences and no one is judgmental of others: "Aware no more that our own "I" exists/How are we to value other things?" In

wine they lose their ego which is responsible for their illusions and their dreams of fame and fortune. In wine they realize that they are all equal and that they will die the same way, naked. This is the “profundity” that Tao finds in wine.

In poem #15 the poet reflects on the insignificance of man with respect to the “vast” universe and on the brevity of life. As he pointed out in poem #1, he reiterates that man has to resign himself to his fate, to getting old and to dying. Most of all, one has to resign oneself to the idea that one did not achieve all the dreams he had in his youth: “Unless we resign ourselves to whims of fate/ It’s just too bad for what we started with.”

Poem #16 continues the conceit of the previous poem. Tao writes about “what he started with.” He says that “[he] had no taste for worldly things” and devoted his whole life to the Classics. However, he has not accomplished anything with his life, as he should have, if he had followed the dictates of the Classics and become a Confucian gentleman and a civil servant. Hightower points out that this poem is “first of all a confession of failure” (H 147). However, the lines are ironic because they refer to the failure of becoming a Confucian gentleman, which Tao Qian criticizes throughout these poems. Hightower adds that Tao knew that Confucius had only contempt for the man who at 40 or 50 had not accomplished anything with his life. (H 148) This failure, instead, is Tao’s success for not having been seduced by a life of fame and fortune, for which he has only contempt, and for having followed his heart and his inclination. The Classics and Confucius, with their notion of clinging “to firmness in adversity” only brought him suffering and grief. As he no longer has a companion like Meng-kung (“a convivial drinker”) (H 149) to drink with, there is no one who can understand him, and nobody with whom to share his feelings.

Poem # 16 was supposed to illustrate the maxim at the end of poem 15 that we must resign ourselves to the whims of fate and accept that we may not end up doing what we wanted to do early in life. From poem #16, it is clear that whether by whim of fate or by choice, Tao Qian did not end up a Confucian. Within this context, the last line of poem #15 is ironic: It’s too bad for what we started out with, if we are Confucian!

Poem # 17 probably belongs to those poems that were inserted later as it does not really fit within the narrative of the twenty poems. Once again it is an allegory of the poet’s condition stifled by the ignorant masses symbolized by a “hidden orchid” choking among the weeds. The beautiful orchid can only be recognized when a “liberating cleansing breeze” arrives to release its perfume and one can tell the rare plant from the weeds. This is the liberating breeze of Tao’s poetry which alone identifies and distinguishes him from the others. The last four lines tell of how Tao

lost his old (Confucian) road by sticking to the Way. Now that the poet is “awake” there is no turning back: “The bow’s discarded when the birds are killed.”

Poem #18 gives the example of Yang Hsiung/Tzu-yün, a great scholar, poet and philosopher of the Han dynasty, who “had a natural taste for wine” but did not have the means to buy it. He had to depend on “sympathetic friends” who could provide it for him in exchange for his advice. Yang Hsiu always obliged them except for one time when he chose to be silent, when he was asked “about aggression.” Hightower explains that “aggression, *fa kuo*, meant, specifically, an attack on a foreign state. Tao’s conclusion in the last two lines is that “the good man obeys the promptings of his heart/ And shows or is silent as the times require.” The critical difficulty, however, in this simple and straightforward poem, as Hightower explains, is how to reconcile this episode with the fact that Yang Hsiung had a “reputation as a turncoat and apologist for the usurper Wang Mang” (H 151). The solution, as Hightower suggests, but not very convincingly, is to attribute lines 7-8 to Liu-hsia Hui. However, Tao seems to imply that Yang Hsiung was a good man and although he liked wine he knew when to keep silent.

Poem #19 recapitulates the story of the poet (as in # 10 and # 16) who driven by hunger left his farming ways to take up the life of a civil servant to feed his family. He had reached the age one should enter service, and he was ashamed for his lost ideals. However, the reference here does not seem to be to Tao’s ideals, as Hightower suggests, but to his lost Confucian ideals he had growing up, as he writes in poem #16. In that poem, which complements poem #19, we are told that in his youth Tao took delight in the Classics but he had not done very much with his life until he was forty. Poem #19, tells of his decision to leave the service and to return to his “lonely” lot. Tao gives the parallel example of Yang Chu who when faced with a similar decision stopped and wept because he was unable to decide. Tao, however, had no problem knowing what road to take, although the rewards for leaving office were not the same. Unlike Yang Chu, Tao had “no royal gifts to squander,” he was happy with just drinking cheap wine: “Cheap wine will serve my purpose just as well.”

## XX

The sages flourished long before my time,  
In the world today few preserve their truth.  
Tirelessly he worked, the old man of Lu,  
To fill and patch and make it pure again.  
Though while he lived no phoenix came to nest,

Yet briefly rites and music were renewed.  
In Lu his subtle teaching came to an end,  
And the flood swelled to the time of reckless Ch'in.  
The *Odes*, the *History* ... what were their crimes  
That they should be reduced one day to ashes?  
Careful and devoted, the old greybeards  
Truly served the cause with all their strength.  
Why is it now that in these later times  
The Six Classics have not a single friend?  
All day the hurried carriages dash by  
But no one comes to ask about the ford.  
If I fail to drink to my heart's content  
I will be untrue to the cap I wear.  
Still I regret the stupid things I've said  
And hope you will forgive a man in his cups.

In the last and concluding poem, Tao sums up his critique of Confucius and his followers as he has done all along. Although Confucius, “the old man of Lu,” worked, tirelessly, to make man whole and virtuous again, his subtle teachings came to nothing. With his death his teachings died with him. Under the Ch'in Emperor Shih-huang-ti, the Classics were even burned. Confucius' followers, “the old greybeards,” tried in vain to revive his ideas, but today nobody reads the Classics anymore, and no one is interested in what these works have to say. In this final poem, Tao makes no apology for describing himself as loving to drink wine, because otherwise he would have been untrue to himself, or to his cap. The cap, Hightower points out, can either refer to “the cloth turban from his head through which he strains the wine” or to his Confucian cap. (H 157) The reference to the cap, however, is ironic because it is the Confucian cap that Tao never wore and that he used only to strain wine. The poem concludes with an apparent apology. Tao regrets the “stupid things” he has said and asks to be forgiven. Hightower quotes Ku Chih who agrees that “Tao is pleading drunkenness in extenuation of the many offensive things he has said in these poems.” (H 157) However, Tao's apology is clearly rhetorical. To be drunk means to be himself and to speak his mind; this is what his poetry is all about.

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My analysis differs from the conventional and established readings. The poems are usually read as a celebration of the Confucian Classics, Confucian scholarship

and above all, the Sage himself. (H 155) Hightower, for instance, interprets the last lines on drinking as Tao's despair at the bad times in which he lives and at the decline of the Classics: "If at the end he abandons himself to drink, it is clearly in despair at the bad times, not a rejection of the properties" (H 155). He argues that this last poem, as the other poems in the series, is self-serving, that Tao Qian was solely concerned about his posthumous fame: "T'ao Ch'ien was very much concerned with the name he was going to leave behind him, and he was just as ready to leave a written record of his life, though his medium was poetry rather than history" (H 41, 1968). He claims that Tao wrote similar poems throughout his life "complaining about and celebrating his life in retirement" so he does not know why he would not do the same in a series of poems "with a misleading title, a disclaimer for a preface, and a conclusion begging pardon and pleading drunkenness as an excuse?" (H 42, 1968) His hypothesis is that Tao must have felt that "he had written something subversive and was afraid of getting into trouble" (H 42, 1968). He believes that Tao did not become a recluse out of religious reasons either Buddhist or Daoist. His retirement is "essentially Confucian" (H 42, 1968) It is the "gesture of a man who, on ethical grounds, cannot come to terms with the world, and so becomes a recluse who renounces all further dealings with officialdom" (H 42, 1968)

Hightower does not believe that Tao is actually a threat to the system, but his existence is "a rebuke to those in power," "because he feels himself to be morally superior" to those who accept a post in society: "so much so in fact that his superior virtue would be sullied by contact with them." This "holier-than-thou attitude" is not one calculated to endear a "professional recluse." Tao accepted his posts from time to time when it came from a dignitary too "august" to refuse or when "it was accompanied by marks of favor too loaded with prestige" that he had no choice but to accept, but for a while. (H 42, 1968) "The important thing is that he was not always free to refuse, because refusal was a positive act of criticism that placed the recluse in a precarious position" (H 43, 1968) When Tao is finally seen as a Recluse, this meant that he was "a man who felt himself too good to serve, even when asked to. (Most men did not wait to be asked)" (H 43, 1968). Probably Tao was sincere in refusing posts that did not really attract him, what was harder to renounce, according to Hightower, was "the chance to play an active role in society, to make a name that would be worthy of his distinguished ancestors" (H 43, 1968).

Hightower does not seem to have much respect for Tao Qian. He believes that he was an hypocrite: "No wonder when the offer came, he (figuratively) rushed to the door, pulling his gown on wrong side out in his haste, only to decline politely when it turned out to be nothing but the same old chance to 'join the muddy game'"

(H 43-44, 1968). “It is the intrusion of these brief moments of weakness, of regret, of dissatisfaction with the life he deliberately chose, that introduces the ambiguity and complexity into these poems.” “This is certainly the work of a man who, if he found a solution to his problems, did not find it an easy one to live with” (H 44, 1968).

A.R. Davis’s reading of the “Twenty poems about drinking” and of Tao Qian’s place in history is somewhat similar to Hightower’s. He interprets the last lines of poem # 20 to mean that “if I do not believe that the course I have chosen is the right one, I am untrue to my Confucian principles (symbolized by my Confucian scholar’s cap) [...] I am sorry for my wavering and ask forgiveness for my failure to see the issues clearly” (Davis 105). However, Davis believes that Hightower was far too influenced by the “general atmosphere of suspected political innuendos with which the Chinese commentators have described almost all of T’ao Yuan-ming’s works” (Davis 106). He does not believe that Hightower represents T’ao position accurately, when he writes that Tao rebuked those in power, or that those in power found it a rebuke. (Davis 106) But he does believe that the title of the twenty poems, as Hightower translates it, is appropriate since the title refers to “the poet’s anguished brooding on the true course for the Confucian scholar-official in an age where the Way is lost” (Davis 105).

A more appropriate reading of Tao Qian, less historical but more focused on the poetry, which departs qualitatively from both those of Hightower and Davis, is Kang-I Sun Chang’s whose focus is mostly on Tao as the poet who was “unappreciated and misunderstood by critics and poets alike for hundreds of years to come”, and still is. (Chang 5) He believes that the reasons can be found with his style of poetry which differed qualitatively from the accepted poetic style of the “hsuan-yen poetry” (neo-Taoist poetry), a philosophical poetry, the reflection of an intellectual movement called “pure conversation” (ch’ing-t’an) in vogue in the third century. (Chang 50)

For Chang, Tao Qian brings to the poetic tradition more than a restoration of classical lyricism: “His poetry is the expression of the total person. This individuality permits him to treat subjects in ways different from his contemporaries” (Chang 12). Poetically, he stood alone and was judged by a set of criteria that were directly opposed to his own literary taste, for instance, his simple and unadorned style, plain and straightforward. (Chang 13) Also unusual is his frequent use of questions followed by answers which gives his poetry “a quality of living presentness through directly imitating daily discourse” (Chang 15). This stylistic originality, his more elastic and syntactical free play, is an expression of his individuality: “For T’ao is

an individual working against the tides of his time, and his ordinariness is itself a sign of self-expression” (Chang 16). In his view, Tao’s poetry is “poetic autobiography “ without being autobiographical in the literal sense but rather, “one of ‘self-biography’ that addresses the problems of self-definition figuratively” (Chang 16). The goal of this self-biography is to “express a consistent desire to define his ultimate self-realization in life” (Chang 16). The other function of Tao’s poetry is “to touch the heart of the reader with the power of universality” with which the reader can identify. “Poised between the poles of factuality and fiction, T’ao Ch’ien turns Chinese literature into something more complex and multifaceted” (Chang 16). For Tao to write poetry is to achieve immortality or rather to find “understanding readers in future generations” (Chang 32).

Stephen Owens is at the other extreme. He believes that Tao Qian is not the naïve and straightforward poet that he claims to be. (Owen 81) His fields and gardens are no more than a setting for creating the image of a naïve self. In Owen’s view, the Preface to the “Drinking Wine poems” are nothing but a ruse to deceive the reader that he is not after fame, and that his friends are entirely to blame for circulating these poems: “hence we have an *amicus ex machina* to perform this disreputable task” (Owen 81). For him, Tao is essentially a self-centered man who does not believe about anyone but himself and his future fame: “And he passionately desires that we recognize and always remember the calm dispassion of his mind, that he has no concern for us at all. He has nothing to say to our kind” (Owen 85).

Robert Ashmore holds a somewhat different view of Tao Qian and of his relation to Confucius and Taoism, and it has to do with the “loss of authenticity that brings the era of Fu Xi and Shen Nong to an end,” which some tried to revive, including Confucius. (Ashmore 106) Since Confucius’ death “the world has labored under the double privation, both of its original state of authenticity” and the person of Confucius, who was able in part “to alleviate the world’s inauthenticity” (Ashmore 106-7). Having failed in his search to find the Way, Tao Qian turns to drinking as a last resort. The meaning of the last two lines of poem #20 rests on how we read the term *shu* which can be either rendered as “indulgence” for Tao’s drinking or as “sympathetic understanding” of what Tao’s drinking means within the tradition of the sage. Ashmore tends for the latter meaning of *shu* as empathy which “made more plausibly the way drinking and producing poems are linked throughout the ‘Drinking Wine’ set,” and as they express “a concern to redress the loss of authenticity and purity that once prevailed in the world” (Ashmore 107-108). “Tao Qian’s poetry takes his place [Confucius’] at the end of this tradition, in an age that offers no way through to the ethical expression of this concern other than a purely

negative steadfastness in adversity --- and no way through to its textual expression other than the seemingly purposeless poetic language of the drunken hermit” (Ashmore 108). “The ethical concealment of the poet is thus matched by the expressive concealment of his language; properly understanding the latter requires that we understand the former, via the moral and hermeneutic capacity of *shu*, or ‘sympathetic understanding.’” “Only by doing so,” continues Ashmore, “can we perceive the fundamental unity of concern that links the apparently frivolous behavior and inconsequential words of the drunken poet with the entire ethical, hermeneutical, and political project of classicist scholarship, for which in this period Confucius himself was the emblematic figure” (Ashmore 109). He also argues, against Zhu Ziqiang, that Tao Qian’s thought is “essentially Taoist” (Ashmore 152). As for the references to the Classics and to Confucius, he believes that Tao is not expressing himself “in an incoherent or contradictory way but that he is translating a familiar set of themes and concerns from the hermeneutical thought of his age into lyric form” (Ashmore 153). For him “Tao Qian took full advantage of both clusters of association in creating a poetic language in which the task of understanding the poem becomes a matter of understanding both the concealed intrinsic worth of the poet and the poet’s own readerly insights into the meanings of the sage and the legacy of the classics.” To read Tao, for Ashmore, is “to read the poet reading the classics” (Ashmore 198-99)

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In my view, the picture that emerges from these twenty poems on drinking is not that of a drunk, but of a poet who uses the poetic persona of a drunkard to convey his poetic message to the reader, independently of whether he was a drunk in real life. The act of “drinking wine” seems to be a special feature of the wise or intelligent man as distinct from the Confucian or civil servant who thinks with the majority, is ambitious and aspires to posthumous fame. In these twenty poems “wine” means much more than the liquid one drinks to forget or to get drunk on. In these poems, “wine” is a figure of speech that characterizes a way of being, a way of following one’s own inclinations, a way of asserting one’s individuality that sets the poet apart from the majority. Wine, as the poet uses the word, is where truth lies and, as he states in the concluding lines of poem #14, in wine there is “profundity,” that is, in *Vino veritas*, or, as they say in Chinese, “*jiu hou tu zhen yan*,”: “After we drink wine, we tell the truth.” Drinking wine is what allows Tao Qian to speak openly and directly as he does, because the words of a drunk cannot be taken seriously. Tao was so successful in his dissimulation that even to this day commentators believe that he was a drunk.

At the level of poetic representation Tao’s dissimulation characterizes the twen-

ty poems as allegorical, that is to say, the reader cannot read literally the story the poet is narrating but has to go beyond its literal sense to the (allegorical) meaning that the words try to convey, as when in poem #5 the poet claims not to have the words to express what, in fact, he has just expressed and which we can read if we “read” between the lines what he wants to say or if we share a similar experience.

Poem #5 also brings up another important aspect of Tao Qian’s poetics: the concept of distance or separation, which is the way the poet can be both present and distant at the same time, “with the mind detached, one’s place becomes remote.” A “detached mind” is not constrained or saturated by the present but it is also and always “remote,” beyond the present. At the level of poetic representation the possibility of the mind to distance itself from itself translates as irony, or self-irony.<sup>3</sup> In this vein, in poem #13, Tao writes about his two “guests,” his two selves, which are always in conflict with each other. This ability to see himself as other, as a double, characterizes not the only the duality inherent in Tao’s persona but also the ironic dimension of these twenty poems, if not of his poetry as a whole. An instance of this duality is present in his own name which was originally Tao Yuanming but was later changed to Tao Qian which means “in hiding.” Whereas Yuanming is the birth name, “ch’ien” or Qian is his chosen name which denotes “remoteness,” his concealed self, and one of the two guests that likes wine. Yuanming is the Confucian self, the self of his youth, which he failed to live up to according to Confucian ideals; Qian, instead, is the reclusive self, the one who follows the Way. The twenty poems can be read, as I have tried to do, as an account of Tao’s “failure” to fulfill his youthful wish to become a Confucian, to be Yuanming, and the reasons why, by following his instincts, or his heart, he chose to stand alone, to become Qian who likes wine, because only in wine can Qian forget Yuanming.

Wine is a form of detachment and a way of becoming aware that life, as Tao Qian says in poem #8, that life is just a dream-illusion. This is the fundamental truth that these poems try to convey and that cannot be put into words but only communicated through images, allegories, figures of speech, and which can only be understood by those who share a similar experience, who listen to their body and their impulses, and, above all, who drink wine.

Tao knows that he is “out of step”: “It’s my nature keeps me out of tune,” but also that to do otherwise is an error: “To go against oneself is a real mistake/.../ There is no turning back my carriage now” (#9). Tao’s place in the world is similar to that of the orchid hidden among the weeds, which can only be discovered by

3 The notion of separation is central to the late poetry of Du Fu. Beside my article, see also Eva Chou, *Reconsidering Du Fu*.

a “liberating cleansing breeze” (#17). Another name of this “liberating cleansing breeze,” which differentiates him from the masses, the “weeds,” is poetry. It is only by reading his poetry that we realize how Tao Qian is different from the Confucians and the civil servants he rebukes; it is only then that we realize the “hidden” (chi'en) genius that springs forth from a man whose only past time is, seemingly, drinking. The function of Tao's poetry is to be a “liberating cleansing breeze” to those willing to listen and to read him. Poetry is Tao's Way, not the Taoist Way, as critics have pointed out. Poem #17 records his discovery as an awakening: “Awake at last.” His decision to return to his hut and farm is a decision to turn to poetry, to become a poet: “Awake at last, I thought of turning back.” Once his mind is made up there is no going back: “The bow's discarded when the birds are killed.” Hightower has difficulty with this poem. He believes that it is, “Not one of the more successful poems in the series” (H 151), and that if anything “this poem is the most clearly political” but also “one of the least clear” (H 150). Indeed, just as all poetry, this poem is political, not in the literal sense, but in the sense that poetry, as the breeze, has the liberating effect to free man from the limitations imposed upon him by a Confucian work ethic that fosters conformity and promises social advancement to the detriment of one's individuality and self-reliance.

The essential difference between my approach and that most of the scholars mentioned here is that my approach to Tao's poetry is not literal. Perhaps this is the distinguishing trait that differentiates a Chinese and a Western approach. When Tao writes that he just wrote these poems for his own pleasure and never meant to publish them, I understand this as a poetic device, just as I believe, differently from Hightower, that all Tao's talk about his drinking is only a metaphor for writing poetry. Mine might be the more naïve view since these scholars of Tao Qian know better what poets like Tao meant when he wrote. On the other hand, there are also critics like Chang who are willing to see that the difficulty of reading Tao's poetry is the result of deviating from the accepted norm. Whatever may be the case, the sole contribution that a Western reading can provide, perhaps, right or wrong, is the benefit of a difference.

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### **Author Profile:**

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Massimo Verdicchio is a professor of Italian and Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. He has written books on Dante and Benedetto Croce and has many articles on Western literature. His interest now is in Tang Poetry. He has published on Du Fu and Li Shangyin and, at present, he is writing on Wang Wei and Li Po.