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Things Endure While We Fade Away: Tao Yuanming on Being Himself

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This article will argue that Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (c. 360 – 425) recognized a tension between being himself (自然 *ziran*) and the natural transformations of the world (*hua* 化). While he advocated a kind of *ziran zhuyi* 自然主義 (“naturalism”), he did not believe that he, or human beings in general, were predisposed to accept the inevitable transformations of the world. Hence, his “naturalism” is not necessarily about fitting into his natural surroundings; despite the fact that he relies on these surroundings in his poetry, and that contemporary scholars sometimes see his work as “pastoral.” Through an examination of “Returning to Live on the Farmstead” 〈歸園田居〉 and several other of Tao’s poems I will demonstrate two things: 1) that Tao saw human beings as distinct from other things in the world who otherwise accept or fit into the natural transformations of the world; and 2) that while Tao understood *ziran* as “being himself,” he often saw *hua* as threats to him being himself.

This article proceeds in four sections. In the first section I provide background on Tao Yuanming and translate “Returning the Live on the Farmstead.” In the second section I situate my reading in the relevant contemporary scholarship on Tao and the scholarship on *ziran*. In the third section I explain Tao’s views on the distinctive nature of being human. Finally, in the fourth section I articulate the tension between *ziran* and *hua*.

Tao Yuanming

After Li Bai (701 – 762) and Du Fu (712 – 770), Tao Yuanming is probably the most well known pre-modern Chinese poet.¹ Tao was born sometime between 352 and 376 CE in Chaisang (now in Jiangxi). He is the great-grandson of Tao Kan (259 – 334), a well-respected general and duke, whose reputation in part maintained their family’s status as an upper class family into Tao’s time. Tao was not as wealthy as many other elites in his day, but he owned a few plots of farmland and a homestead. He married twice, and had at least five sons. Tao held several minor posts in the government. In 405 Tao was put in charge of an area known as Pengze. Within 80 days of accepting the post however, his sister died, and under the pretense of mourning his sister, Tao left his post and permanently returned to his homestead. Tao’s retirement became foundational for the tradition of reclusion that developed after him. Both Confucians and Daoists modeled their retirements after his, and scholars today still debate his affiliation with these schools. Tao’s work survives in a collection of approximately 150 pieces of poetry and prose compiled in the century or two after his death.²

Tao’s retirement in 405 is chronicled in one of his most well known poems, “The Return” (歸去來兮辭). In the preface he states, “After a few days, and with further reflection I felt like going back. Why? Because my natural disposition is to be myself (*ziran*), and it cannot be found through pretense or force. Hunger and cold might be intense, but going against myself makes me sick.”³ The poem then goes on to recount his joy in reuniting with his family and neighbors, and to tell of his hard, but rewarding, work in the fields. The poem then concludes:

Climbing the eastern bank I’ll let out a relaxed whistle,

58 And write poetry next to the clear flowing stream.

I’ll ride the transformations of the world until my return is finished,

60 Delighting in what Heaven has given me, why doubt any more?⁴

Shortly after this he wrote another version of his homecoming, which seems to have been composed as the optimism of the earlier poem faded away. I would like to use this poem, called “Returning to Live on the Farmstead,” as a way of framing the relevant issues of this article.⁵

The poem, in five stanzas, reads:

When young I did not fit in with the common tune,
2 My nature was rooted in a love of hills and mountains.
By mistake I fell into a dusty net,
4 And all of a sudden 30 years had passed.
The trapped bird longs for his former woods,
6 The fish in the pond dreams of his old lake.
I break up the uncultivated land on the border of the southern wilds,
8 And keep to my awkwardness in returning to the farm.
My homestead is a couple of acres,
10 My thatched roof covers several rooms.
Elms and willows shade the back eaves,
12 Peach and plum trees unfold in front of the hall.
The distant village is hazy and indistinct,
14 Smoke from households floats gentle and soft.
A dog barks far down some lane,
16 A cock crows from atop a mulberry tree.
In my home there is no dust or disorder;
18 A bare room allows for plenty of repose.

Trapped in a cage for so long,
20 I can finally go back to being myself (*ziran*).
Out here in the countryside there are few worldly affairs;
22 In my narrow lane carriages rarely appear.
The bright sun is blocked out by my bramble gate;
24 The bare room keeps out dusty thoughts.
Sometimes I go into the village,
26 Bending the grass the villagers come and go.
When we see each other there is no convoluted talk;
28 We only discuss the growth of our hemp and mulberry trees.
Day after day my hemp and mulberry trees grow older,
30 And day after day my fields grow wider.
I often fear the arrival of frost and hail,
32 When my crops will wither and fall like the grass and weeds.
I plant beans beneath the southern mountain;
34 The grass flourishes, but bean sprouts are few.
I wake up early to clear out the wild brush,
36 And return home with the moon and hoe on my shoulder.
The path is narrow as the grass and trees grow thick,
38 The evening dew wets my clothes.
Wet clothes are not worth begrudging,
40 Just let my hope not be in vain.
It's been long since I've enjoyed the mountains and marshes;

42 And given release to the pleasure of the forests and wilds.
So I take my children and their cousins by the hand,
44 And part the brush, walking to a desolate village.
We pace and wander among tombs and graves,
46 Lingering where the previous inhabitants once lived.
The spots for wells and fireplaces are still there;
48 The decayed stumps of bamboo and mulberry trees remain.
I ask someone gathering firewood,
50 “What happened to all these people?”
He responded to me, saying,
52 “They are dead and gone; none are left.”
In one generation the court and market change;
54 These are truly not empty words.
Life is a dream-like transformation (*hua*);
56 In the end we return to bare nothingness.
With deep sorrow I come back with only my walking stick,
58 Winding through a rugged path covered with bushes.
The mountain brook is clear and shallow,
60 And so I use it to wash my feet.
I strain my recently brewed wine,
62 And prepare a chicken to gather the neighbors.
As the sun sets, the room darkens;
64 A small fire replaces the candle’s light.

We delight in getting together, and grieve that night is so short;

66 Another dawn has already arrived.⁶

This poem mentions several relevant themes, including talk of the author's natural dispositions, discussed in terms of *ziran*; the inevitability of change, discussed in terms of *hua*; and the author's relationship with the changes or transformations of the world he inhabits.

In Harmony with Nature

A fairly common interpretation of Tao Yuanming is that he advocates a kind of harmony with nature.⁷ This is best illustrated in a book written by Lu Shuyuan, a professor of literature at Soochow University, published in 2012 and translated into English in 2016. In Chinese the book is titled *Tao Yuanming de youling (Specters of Tao Yuanming)*, which is a play on Jacques Derrida's 1993 book, *Specters of Marx*. Derrida's book argues for the lingering relevance of Karl Marx in our contemporary world, and Lu attempts to do something similar. Lu's book was awarded the Lu Xun prize for literature in 2014. The English title of the book is different from the Chinese. In English it spells out the contemporary relevance of Tao's thought more explicitly. The title is *The Ecological Era and Classical Chinese Naturalism: A Case Study of Tao Yuanming*; and as one can guess, the book uses Tao's work as a specter of sorts to construct an ecological argument relevant for the modern world. Mary Evelyn Tucker, director of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University and scholar of Japanese Confucianism, wrote the foreword for the translation. In it she states that Tao Yuanming's work enables a "return to the universe."⁸ In the book itself Lu develops this line of thought, describing Tao as a "literary ecologist" who writes "ecological poetry."⁹ Lu's motivation is the contemporary environmental crisis. He argues, "The most essential question that the academia, East or West, faces is to

rethink and readjust the relationship between man and nature in order to alleviate, if not solve, the world's eco-crisis and to promote peace and harmony.”¹⁰ For Lu, Tao Yuanming provides a way forward: “Given the gravity of ‘Nature,’ Tao Yuanming, as a Nature poet and avatar of nature, is destined to resurrect in a new synthesis of oriental and occidental philosophies.”¹¹

More specifically Lu claims,

[Tao] may help people today, who are wandering in the barren spiritual wilderness, to reorient themselves, to clean the sky and the land, and to search for the lost spirituality of man. . . . Tao's literary world and the tradition he represents are explored in order to evoke an innocent, pure, and simple soul, a soul that enables man to rediscover Nature, to live harmoniously with Nature, and to integrate him with Nature when society is materialized and commercialized, when Nature is overburdened, if not exhausted, and when man is deprived of his soul or spirituality.¹²

In Lu's reading, Tao advocates harmonizing with nature; yet if we compare these views with “Returning to Live on the Farmstead” there are a number of tensions. For one, despite the fact that Tao describes himself as “naturally rooted in a love of hills and mountains” he actually works quite hard *against* aspects of nature to cultivate his farm. Not only does he have to clear “the wilds” to make way for his crops—leaving at sunrise and returning home after dark—but he constantly worries that his crops will be destroyed by natural forces. Tao's ideal “nature,” to borrow from the contemporary scholar Tian Xiaofei is an “unnatural nature”—one tamed to the needs of humanity.¹³ Indeed, the very characters in the title of the poem, *yuantian* 園田 (literally gardens and farm fields), signify domesticated spaces by means of the square-like borders of the characters—suggesting areas ordered by human ingenuity. Building on this we might say that if

there is a return to nature, it is a much more ambivalent return than often recognized. Plant life, following scholars such as Lu, might exhibit a kind of carefree living, but human living is in fact not so carefree.

To be sure, the interpretations of scholars such as Lu are not entirely wrong. If we take a couple of Tao's poems in isolation, we can arrive at the same reading. For instance, other than the poem I quoted at the very beginning of this article, Tao, in other places, similarly endorses harmonizing with the transformations of the world. This happens most famously, in a poem titled "Body, Shadow, and Spirit" 〈形影神〉, which is often seen as Tao's most philosophical poem. In this piece Tao personifies three aspects of human beings, bringing them into dialogue with each other on the question of how to cope with the inevitability of death. Body speaks first, lamenting that we, human beings, are unlike other things in the world that go through cycles of life and death, and hence we should make the most of life by "never refusing a drink."¹⁴ Shadow rejoins that pleasures such as wine might be able to relieve temporary concern, but it's better to create a name for yourself that will be remembered by others after you are gone. Spirit then speaks, which as Tao explains in the preface to the poem, is done "to clarify *ziran* so as to resolve the debate." In part Spirit says,

Thinking so hard harms my well-being;

52 It's more fitting to give yourself over to the revolutions of time.

Release and let go in the midst of great transformation (*hua*);

54 Be without joy and without fear.

When it's time to expire, then go and expire;

56 No longer return to such deep and plentiful concern.¹⁵

Here Tao again stresses a kind of harmonization with the natural transformations of the world, focusing particularly on death.

In another poem, which also focuses on the theme of death, Tao writes his own elegy of sorts. In speaking about his life he uses language similar to “The Return,” hoping that he will be remembered as someone who “took joy in Heaven and accepted his lot, until the end of his days.”¹⁶ In each of these poems Tao advocates an acceptance of, and joy in, the transformations of Heaven. Importantly, in “Body, Shadow, and Spirit” Tao couches Spirit’s words as an explanation of *ziran*.

Tao is often seen by contemporary interpreters as advocating a kind of *ziran zhuyi*, or “naturalism.”¹⁷ While the term *ziran* is important for Tao, it only appears four times in his collected works.¹⁸ I have already quoted three of them in this article. In a general sense, the term *ziran* as used in early Chinese literature refers to things acting without calculation or without force (as in “not forcing oneself to do something”). Christoph Harbsmeier, in a broad textual study of the term, argues that *ziran* is translatable as “to be naturally so.”¹⁹ In some early texts, such as the *Laozi*, *ziran* is associated with terms including *dao* 道 or *tian* 天, which connect *ziran* with the way in which the world goes through processes of creative transformation. In texts such as the *Zhuangzi*, which build on claims like those in the *Laozi*, the world is seen as spontaneously according with the *Dao*, and human action on the world is often seen as that which pushes the world out of sync with the *Dao*. The challenge, in this perspective, is for humans to act *naturally*; and the problem of acting naturally is a particularly human problem since of all things in the world, only humans tend to *not* be *ziran*. In this regard, human beings can (although do not necessarily have to) look to non-human things in the world as models of sorts for understanding *ziran*. However, at the same time, human beings are not seen as

ontologically distinct from the rest of the world as all things are endowed with, and interconnected by, the ordering patterns of the cosmos (*tianli* 天理). This is a significant point of contrast with the English term “natural world” as it is often used as a way of expressing the difference between what is seen as created by humans in contrast with what is seen as coming forth by non-human means. Frequently in this view, humans are seen as ontologically separate from the rest of the world. Such a concept is not readily found in Chinese texts, although it is translated into contemporary Chinese as *ziranjie* 自然界 (or *daziran* 大自然). This association with the English term “nature” and the Chinese term *ziran* has led to much discussion about the role of Chinese thought in ecology and environmentalism.

In an article titled “Rethinking Environmental Issues in a Daoist Context: Why Daoism is and is not Environmentalism,” Paul D’Ambrosio discusses the relationship between *ziran* and terms like the natural world. Relying in part on the work of other contemporary scholars D’Ambrosio shows that *ziran* in early Daoist texts often refers to *benxing* 本性, or “the specific characteristics, tendency, or propensity that any given thing has.” In other words, all things in the world, including humans, have a *benxing*, and to be *ziran* is to be in tune with this *benxing*. D’Ambrosio continues,

According to this reading, the respect and admiration for *ziran* that is found in both the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* is not one for some nonhuman nature which should be emulated, but for something that is shared by humans and nonhumans alike. When these texts discuss following *ziran*, they are referring to the sages’ ability to follow *their own* natural tendencies (*benxing*) without trying to act in accordance with any fixed models or notions of proper relationships (including *nature* or ethics). In other words, the regard that Daoism holds for *ziran* has

nothing to do with *ziranjie* (nature), but speaks instead to the original tendency all things have. It is a *ziran* of *how* and not *what*.²⁰

D'Ambrosio's relevant point is that the so-called natural world is not something that humans have to connect (or reconnect) with in order to realize themselves. Rather, self-realization is predicated on understanding one's *benxing*, and these natural tendencies have no necessary relationship with non-human creations (other than the inherent connection that all things have as a part of being a thing in the world). Plants, as such, follow a mode of intentionless or spontaneous action, and in some way might be said to provide a model of such action, but they do not provide a fixed model in the sense of advocating an ideal for habitat. In other words, plants, in as much as they provide a model, provide a model of *how* to act, not a model of *what* to do. D'Ambrosio more specifically explains *ziran* as follows: "The goal [of *ziran*] is not to establish an ethical or moral relationship with other people or one's environment, but to operate in such a way that there is no distinction between the human and whatever situation he or she is in. In other words, the person becomes totally what they do; their movements, thoughts and feelings are all perfectly integrated into whatever actions they take."²¹ *Ziran*, as such, is an authentic form of action; it is to act naturally. These actions, however, may or may not be ecological. The kinds of actions one takes would depend on one's context, and would vary depending on whether one lived, for instance, in an urban or rural setting. Said more strongly, if there are ecological aspects associated with *ziran* they are implicit, not explicit.

In the centuries between the *Zhuangzi* and Tao Yuanming the notion of *ziran* was developed in various ways.²² Nonetheless, Tao uses *ziran* in senses similar to the accounts offered by Harbsmeier and D'Ambrosio. In the line quoted at the beginning of this article from the preface of "The Return," for example, Tao claims that his "natural disposition" (*zhixing* 質

性) is to be *ziran* and that remaining a government official was forcing himself to go against these natural dispositions. In “Returning to Live on the Farmstead” he also uses language similar to *benxing*, explaining that his “nature was rooted in a love of hills and mountains” (*xing ben ai qiushan* 性本愛丘山). He then goes on to say that in returning home he could finally go back to a state of *ziran*. While the association of Tao’s “nature” with hills and mountains might suggest a claim about the power of the non-human world to provide a kind of genuine context for human self-realization, the association instead seems to be call for acting in accordance with one’s natural dispositions, or *benxing*, which for Tao happens to entail a close proximity to hills and mountains. Interestingly, the only other appearance of the term “hills” (*qiu* 丘) in “Returning to Live on the Farmstead” is in the description of the tombs (or “grave mounds,” *qiu* 丘) that Tao and his family wander around, which give way to his melancholy reflection on the transience of human life.²³ Additionally, the next appearance of the term “mountain” (*shan* 山) occurs in the context of Tao’s struggle to grow beans that cannot compete with the fast-growing grass. While in Tao’s poetry these non-human things often provide a context where Tao expresses an intimate connection with them, at the same time they do not provide the kind of normative model for self-realization that many interpreters advocate. Indeed, as I detail later in this article, these “natural” things can be as threatening as they are inspiring.

This is not to downplay the role of non-human objects in Tao’s work. Traditional interpreters since the 13th century have used the term *chingjing jiaorong* 情景交融 (“a melding of feeling and scenery”) to describe this.²⁴ Kang-I Sun Chang explains *chingjing jiaorong* as a “mingled perspective” where Tao’s feelings extend beyond his individual self and find resonance in his environment.²⁵ Indeed, Tao’s connection with plants and other non-human objects is important to his work.

At the same time, I do not mean to downplay Tao's views on the distinctive aspects of human beings. While he does not see a division between a human world and a natural world he does see human beings as having distinctive features, which make human life significantly different from non-human, particularly plant, life.

The Trouble of Being Human

The previously mentioned poem, "Body, Shadow, and Spirit" begins with Body stating,

Heaven and earth are constant, without end;
2 Mountains and rivers do not change with time.
Grass and trees have an unending principle;
4 With dew they flourish, and with frost they break.
It is human beings that are the most aware and wise;
6 And they alone that are not like these other things.
All of a sudden they appear in the midst of the world;
8 And in a flash they leave without hope of return.²⁶

Body describes human beings as unlike the heavens and the earth, or mountains and rivers, which seem to have no end. Even plants, which wither in frost, come back to life with the fresh dews of the spring. Human beings, in contrast, are not enduring like mountains and do not return to life like plants. Additionally, human beings, as the most sentient of beings, are profoundly aware of this difference. The two other personified figures in the poem, Shadow and Spirit, come to disagree with Body's proposed method of coping with this condition (i.e., enjoying basic pleasures while alive), however, they do not disagree with Body's description of it. In a much longer poem titled "Moved by Scholars not Encountering [the Right Times]" 〈感士不遇〉,

Tao expresses a similar idea. The poem begins, “Alas! When this large pile of clay receives animation, why is it that only humans are aware?”²⁷ Both of these poems allude to a line from a much earlier text called the *Shangshu*, which is one of several texts coming from the Zhou dynasty (1046 – 256 BCE) that was seen as authoritative in Tao’s time. The line from the *Shangshu* reads, “Heaven and earth are the mother and father of all things; yet among all things, only humans are aware.”²⁸ Much could be said about the *Shangshu*, and this line in particular; however, the relevant point for my purpose is to note that Tao is participating in a long tradition that highlights the distinctive features of humanity. The term these texts use is *ling* 靈, which I translated as “aware.” Throughout early Chinese literature *ling* is used in various ways, oftentimes referring to spiritual forces that flow throughout the world (*shen* 神). In “Moved by Scholars not Encountering [the Right Times]” Tao associates *ling* with *qi* 氣 (“animation”), an association made in many other texts during and before Tao’s time.²⁹ *Qi* in this sense is an animating force found in all things throughout the world. Some things, such as plants, have a very coarse and heavy *qi*, while other things, such as human beings, also have a lighter and more refined *qi*, which allows human beings to be mobile and to be more perceptive than plants. This latter kind of *qi* is sometimes described as “spirit-like” (*shen* 神) or “numinous,” a common translation of *ling*. *Ling* in this regard is the animating force that makes human beings different from other things in the world. At the same time, though, human beings are not categorically different; rather, *ling* signals a qualitative difference that makes human beings more intelligent (*ming* 明), and in Tao’s case, more aware of their finite existence. As I will discuss momentarily, Tao explains this awareness in various ways; however, he expresses the basic difference between human beings and many other things in the world quite succinctly in a poem lamenting the death of his cousin. There, Tao simply states, “Things endure, while we fade away.”³⁰

Tao's assortment of "Miscellaneous Poems" 〈雜詩〉 detail the contrast between human beings and other things in the world.³¹ The first poem begins,

We live without root or stem;
2 Blown about like dust on a path.
Scattered and expelled by twists of wind;
4 This is certainly not an enduring form.³²

While Tao uses plant imagery as a metaphor to express the transience of human life, one reason the metaphor works is because the contrast between plants and human beings is accurate. In other words, unlike plants, which are rooted in a stable location, humans are mobile and not fixed. This leads to a number of insights. For one, since we do not have a permanent location, and are capable of mobility, we must seek to find a place where we fit in. If we are lucky we will find such a place, and in Tao's terms, we can "return." If we are not lucky we will wander from place to place, blown about by the winds of fate.

Secondly, Tao sees the lack of place related to the way in which our selves do not last long in comparison with other things in the world. Like the poet's realization when conversing with the firewood gatherer in "Returning to Live on the Farmstead," times change before human beings are ready for change. As Tao says in the first miscellaneous poem, "If you meet the right moment, you must work hard; months and years do not wait on humanity."³³ This theme of being dislocated in time occurs throughout Tao's miscellaneous poems. The third poem states, "The sun and moon have their revolving cycles; but when I die, I will not rise again."³⁴ The second poem reads, "Days and months toss people aside; and our ambitions do not reach their aim."³⁵ And the seventh poem, describing the cycle of time says, "The days and months [literally, the sun and moon] are unwilling to slow down; the four seasons press upon and compel each

other.”³⁶ The picture Tao paints is one where human beings are not only different from other things in the world, but the world itself competes with human beings to the point that we are at odds with other forces in the world. Time, manifest in the physical forms of the sun and moon, push us aside as they move on their way. These celestial bodies maintain a constant cycle, while we only have one rotation.

In a poem that Tao writes after “drinking wine” 〈飲酒〉 he states,

Living in hard times I lack helping hands;

2 Untamed brush runs wild in my homestead.

In rows there are flying birds;

4 In silence no visitors leave traces.

How vast is the universe;

6 And how seldom does human life exceed a century.³⁷

This poem is important for two reasons. For one, Tao again stresses the disconnect between human beings and the world we inhabit. While the universe expands indefinitely, our lives rarely extend more than 100 years. Part of being human means a finite existence; and building on the discourse of *ling* mentioned above, part of being human also means an acute awareness of our finitude.

The second reason this poem is important is because of Tao’s description of the untamed brush. As we saw in “Returning to Live on the Farmstead” where untamed grass threatened Tao’s bean crops, plant life in this poem threatens Tao’s homestead. This is not an uncommon theme in Tao’s work. These kinds of descriptions are found in at least half a dozen poems. In the very next poem Tao writes in the drinking wine series, for instance, Tao likewise states that his “front courtyard is covered with wild grass.”³⁸ The image of wild plants growing in what were

once domesticated spaces occurs especially often in poems related to death. In one poem lamenting the death of his cousin, Tao describes how “year-old grass blankets the front courtyard.”³⁹ In a poetic essay lamenting the death of his sister Tao states,

Winter has gone, and summer has arrived;
8 The days and months slowly push us apart.
Dust collects on the rafters;
10 And grass in the courtyard grows wild with weeds.⁴⁰

In these poems Tao highlights the ways in which plant life threatens aspects of human living. This is not an acute threat in the sense that plants jeopardize any one human life in a particular moment. Rather, this is a general and gradual threat because plant life has something that human life does not have—namely, time. Plants, in Tao’s view, follow the cycle of the seasons in withering and flourishing; every year extending their reach. While human beings have their “100 years” plants seems to have much more.⁴¹ In the fourth stanza of “Returning to Live on the Farmstead” Tao describes a visit to a desolate village where only the ruins of fireplaces and wells remained. Tao and his family wander around the graves of the former inhabitants. These are the only remnants of human existence. Tao seems perplexed by this—how could human living not be marked by something more grand? Part of the power of this poem is Tao’s realization that the things that he values are not necessarily valued by the world he inhabits. Human beings work hard to be remembered, but in the end there is little left to identify us. In the broad scheme of things, human existence is not a necessary existence for the continued survival of the world, and the world itself works against our remembrances. Said more starkly, it is only a matter of time before the memorials we construct will be covered with weeds.

This description of the human condition allows Tao to liken human beings to visitors who come to live in the world but for a short moment. He uses this metaphor in his miscellaneous poems and in his poems written after drinking wine.⁴² In a poem where plant imagery is central, titled “Trees in Bloom” 〈榮木〉, Tao uses the short-lived blossoming of flowers to discuss the small window human beings have for finding success in life. As a part of the poem Tao simply states, “Human life is like a sojourn.”⁴³ In “Moved by Scholars not Encountering [the Right Times],” Tao likewise states, “We are lodged in this body for a hundred years; and in a blink and a breath it’s over.”⁴⁴ Tao’s point here is that life is fleeting. We come into this world without roots and where our “100 years” of life is dwarfed by the immensity of the world such that we have little time to find a fitting home. In Tao’s perspective we are born with desire to follow our *benxing*, yet we are often dislocated from the conditions that allow us to follow it. Being ourselves (*ziran*) is no easy task when time is fleeting in a world of constant change.

Tao on the Natural Transformations of the World

In “Returning to Live on the Farmstead” Tao likens human living to a “dream-like transformation” (*huanhua* 幻化); thereby highlighting, among other things, the brevity of life. “In the end,” he continues, “we return to bare nothingness” (*zhong dang gui xuwu* 終當歸虛無). These lines do not point to a comforting notion of existence, and commentators have spent a lot of time explaining them. For the purposes of this article I want to focus on Tao’s use of the term *xu* 虛 (“bare,” “empty”). Like the term *wu* 無 (“nothingness,” “non-being”), which is significant in texts such as the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, *xu* is particularly significant in this poem. In the first stanza *xu* appears along with *wu*, and seems to have a positive meaning: “In my home there is no dust or disorder; a bare room allows for plenty of repose” (*huting wuchenza xushi youyuxian* 戶

庭無塵雜，虛室有餘閑). The second stanza similarly employs *xu* positively: “A bare room keeps out dusty thoughts” (*xushi jue chenxiang* 虛室絕塵想). In both of these cases the emptiness of Tao’s home represents, or allows for, a life unencumbered by worry. When dusty thoughts are cut off—a reference similar to the dusty net of official life in the first stanza—one can live in a carefree manner. However, when his crops struggle in the third stanza and he visits the ruins of a village in the fourth stanza, *xu* does not seem to be wholly positive. When asking about the village ruins Tao is told, “The people are dead and gone; none are left.” Tao then quotes what appears to be a common saying about the court and market changing every generation. This saying refers to the speed at which circumstances change. Over a period of 20 or 30 years the people involved in a particular sphere of activity will be slowly replaced such that a completely new group of people eventually occupy the same space. Thus, what was once familiar becomes largely foreign. In commenting on this phrase Tao states, “These are truly not empty words” (*ciyu zhenbuxu* 此語真不虛). Tao then comments on the brevity of life, and, as mentioned previously, states that “In the end we return to bare nothingness.” His usage of *xu* in these two lines is somewhat different than the way he uses it earlier in the poem. The emptiness of his house contrasts with the emptiness of the village.⁴⁵ The emptiness of his home allows for repose, but the emptiness of the village provides a reminder of the emptiness of human existence. The saying about the court and market changing every generation is “not empty” in the sense that it fills Tao with apprehension. Being *xu* is positive in that it describes a state of being without worry, yet Tao’s realization of the emptiness of life is the very thing that fills him with worry. As he wanders around the graves, which seem to bear no identity, he comes to understand that in the end we die, are buried, and the earth will cover us over until nothing remains. So for Tao emptiness allows for repose, but emptiness also haunts him. It turns out that in his pursuit of a

carefree life, worry is unavoidable since emptiness is built into the world humans inhabit. While the fifth stanza of the poem describes how Tao copes with this worry, the point worth stressing here is that many of Tao's central terms work like *xu*; at face value they seem to be positive, things he embraces; but on closer inspection, his embrace is much more awkward as these terms have poignant aspects to them. The English word "poignant" is quite apt in describing these aspects. Etymologically, poignant is related to words meaning "prick" or "pierce," and conveys a sense of joy tinged by reflective sorrow.⁴⁶ For Tao, concepts such as *xu* entail these very feelings.

Similar to *xu*, the term *hua* also has poignant aspects. So while Tao in some places appears to rejoice in the natural transformations of the world, in other places he is much more ambivalent. Earlier in this article I quoted from poems where Tao seems to accept or look forward to these *hua*. The vast majority of times Tao uses *hua*, however, suggest not only a lingering sorrow associated with *hua*, but that these *hua*, as aspects of the world we inhabit, threaten our prospects of being ourselves.

In a poem that highlights themes of changing times, utilizing the imagery of courts and markets, Tao stresses the disconcerting aspects of *hua*. The poem is titled "Responding to Attendant Zhang at the End of the Year" 〈歲暮和張常侍〉.⁴⁷ In its entirety the poem reads,

Visiting the market and court I grieve old friends;
2 And am moved as the sun gallops into the evening pool.⁴⁸
With tomorrow's morning there will be no more today;
4 As the year ends, what can I say?
This fresh face has lost its luster;
6 And white hairs have multiplied.
How off target were the words of Duke Mu;⁴⁹

8 What physical strength is not yet gone?
As evening comes, a distant wind arises;
10 Wintry clouds cover the western mountains.
Biting and sharp, the air becomes harsh;
12 In a rush and muddle, flying birds return home.
People's lives rarely last long;
14 And worse yet, are wrapped in toil and worry.
Yet again no good wine arrives,
16 And I have nothing with which to rejoice in the current year.
Success and failure are not worth fretting over;
18 Yet I am withered and wearied by transformation (*hua*) and change.
I clutch myself, bearing deep affection;
20 The turns of time increase my regret.⁵⁰

This melancholy poem expresses several themes already discussed in this article including the fleeting nature of time and the speed with which the world changes. It also explicitly refers to the way in which *hua* “wither and weary” the author despite his attempt to be unconcerned with success and failure.

The term *hua* plays an important role in a number of early Chinese texts. In a general sense it refers to things changing from one state to another, and is often associated with other terms that suggest change and movement; including terms such as *bian* 變 and *dong* 動. The “Zhongyong” chapter of the *Liji*, for instance, connects these three terms together in the context of human beings cultivating themselves such that they are able to “participate in the transforming and nourishing process of the heavens and the earth.” The Tang dynasty commentator, Kong

Yingda (574 – 648), explains “change” (*bian* 變) and “transformation” (*hua*) in this passage as follows: “You call it ‘change’ when it begins gradually. As change occurs, both new and old forms are there; but when the changes exhaust the old form, and you have the new form, you call it ‘transformation.’”⁵¹ *Hua* in this context is a movement from one configuration to the next; and can be seen in contexts such as human beings transitioning from youth to old age. While Kong’s image of an old form and new form suggests a continuous entity shifting from one phase to another, the process need not be understood as some kind of essence inhabiting one thing before moving on to the next. For Tao in particular, where *hua* is often associated with death, there is not necessarily a continuous identity that transitions into the next phase. In other words, when we die it is not the case that some permanent entity continues on in a new body. Rather, as suggested in the discussion of *qi* previously, what continues on are the energies that constituted and animated us. Early Chinese texts often conceptualize these energies en masse by using terms such as *tian* (or *tiandi*) and *dao*; and as in the “Zhongyong,” *hua* is explicitly associated with these kinds of terms. *Hua*, as such, refer to the natural transformations of the world, in that the heavens and the earth spontaneously create and exhaust things from one moment to the next. Human beings, as but one of the things created by the heavens and the earth, are subject to the process of transformation. And as this poem makes clear, Tao Yuanming is sometimes ambivalent about this process.

In addition to this poem, Tao expresses his ambivalence in several other poems. In one titled “The Ninth Day of the Ninth Month in the Year 409” 〈己酉歲九月九日〉 Tao writes,

The transformations of the world seek after and follow upon each other;

10 How could human life not be hard (*lao* 勞)?

From antiquity all have had to die;

12 But thinking of it worries my heart.

What can I use to calm my feelings?

14 With cloudy wine I'll please myself.

I do not know about 1000 years,

16 So for the moment I'll use this to lengthen today.⁵²

Here Tao describes *lao* (“toil,” “arduousness”) as a necessary part of life due to the natural transformations of the world. Given the unrelenting character of these transformations, human life cannot but be hard. Interestingly, the content of this poem is purposely ironic in light of its title. The term “nine” (*jiu* 九) is a homophone for the term “long lasting” (*jiu* 久); and in Tao’s time the ninth day of the ninth month was commonly associated with longevity.⁵³ In other words, this double-nine day was a time where many people focused on practices they believed could extend their lives. Some of these practices involved ingesting elixirs, which is likely what Tao alludes to in drinking wine that will “lengthen today.” The quest for immortality was widespread in fifth century China; and Tao discussed the topic in several other poems (often expressing skepticism).⁵⁴ In this poem, however, rather than pursuing the theme of longevity or immortality, Tao resigns himself to the inevitability of death, attempting to take comfort in his home-brewed elixir of wine that can do little more than prolong the day. Transformation, in this sense, is so inescapable that not only is death certain, but life itself is a struggle in the midst of incessant change.

So while Tao has his moments of embracing the transformations of the world, he also has his moments of cynicism. As a matter of fact, even in places where Tao endorses *hua* he often goes on to highlight its poignant aspects. For instance, previously I quoted a passage from the elegy Tao writes for himself. As a part of it he describes himself as someone who “took joy in

Heaven and accepted his lot, until the end of his days.” Shortly after this line Tao states, “I have now been transformed, and can be without regret.” Yet despite these statements Tao closes his elegy as follows:

- 60 Cold and hot quickly pass by;
Death is certainly different from life.
- 62 My wife’s relatives arrive in the morning,
And close friends hurry over in the evening.
- 64 Buried in the midst of the wilds,
Where souls are put to rest.
- 66 I am carried with a somber mood;
The tomb’s gate creaks open.
- 68 The extravagance of Song is shameful,⁵⁵
And the frugality of Wangsun is laughable.⁵⁶
- 70 Empty and extinct;
Remorseful and remote.
- 72 No mound or tree [marks the grave];
Days and months quickly pass by.
- 74 Not valuing praise before,
Who would care about songs of adoration after?
- 76 Life is certainly hard;
Is death like life?
- 78 Alas! Oh! Alas!⁵⁷

This is not the voice of someone who has fully embraced the transformations of the world. Here we see that even if Tao accepted his lot in life and died without regret, he does not “transform” without lamenting the difficulty of life or worrying about the possible difficulties of his next form.

Tao’s ambivalence about the natural transformations of the world stands in sharp contrast with portions of the *Zhuangzi*, a text that Tao is otherwise fond of (alluding to it more than any text other than the *Shijing*). The “Dazongshi” chapter in particular uses several of the terms Tao uses in addressing the issues under discussion.⁵⁸ The *Zhuangzi*’s views on *hua* are especially relevant as displayed in a vignette about Zisi, Ziyu, Zili, and Zilai, four friends united in “recognizing life and death, existence and nonexistence, as one continuous form.”⁵⁹ The passage explains that Ziyu became ill—his body literally falling apart. Zisi visited him, asking whether Ziyu “detested” his bodily changes. Ziyu responded with surprise—rejoicing in the possibility that his left arm might eventually be “transformed” into a rooster that would greet the morning sun; or that his butt might be “transformed” into a wheel that would roll around the world. He further added,

I obtained [this form] because it was time, and will lose it as time moves on. In according with time and dwelling in its movements, sorrow and joy cannot touch [you]. This is what the ancients called “loosening the bind.” Those who cannot loosen themselves will be bound by things. Nothing can conquer Heaven—that’s the way it’s always been. What would I have to detest?⁶⁰

Thus, for Ziyu, transformation was something grand; something celebrated and not feared. The story continues, saying that a little while later Zilai fell ill and was about to die. As his family

wept over him Zili arrived, chastising his family, saying, “Hey! Get out! Don’t disturb this transformation!” On his deathbed Zilai told Zili,

If a great metal smith were casting metal, and the metal were to jump up and say, “I must be made into the finest sword,” the smith would certainly think it was odd metal. And so if one happens to have a human form, to say, “Only a human! [I want to be] only a human!” the process of creation and transformation would certainly think this was an odd person. And so I take heaven and earth as a great furnace, and creation and transformation as a great smith. Where could I be sent and it not be right?⁶¹

According to Zilai, “creation and transformation” (*zaohua* 造化) make what they will with things in the world. Humans can no more decide to be human any more than metal can decide to be a sword. A person might even desire to remain human far beyond the normal life time allotted for human beings, but people cannot control the process of transformation. Humans will be made into whatever it is that things go on to become; and we can protest this process or we can rejoice in it. However, much like the *Zhuangzi*’s praying mantis trying to stop the wagon wheel, we cannot halt the process of transformation.

In part, the *Zhuangzi* argues for a view of existence that transcends anthropocentrism. If we come to see things beyond our limited (human) perspectives, we will understand that human living is but one limited form of existence, and that the world will continue on long after human beings are gone, as the world presumably did before human beings appeared. Franklin Perkins captures this quite nicely in an essay titled, “Wandering Beyond Tragedy with Zhuangzi.” In this article Perkins argues that the *Zhuangzi* advocates a comedic (or playful) perspective on the world—a view that goes beyond optimistic views of the world where the world is seen as

programmed to respond to human concerns, and pessimistic views that see the world as unresponsive to human concerns. In the end, Zhuangzi's view is comedic in that he recognizes the unresponsive nature of the world; yet rather than protest it (as one would in a tragic view) Zhuangzi asks us to embrace it and wander in the transformations of the world as if playing a series of games (situations we commit ourselves to knowing their arbitrary and meaningless nature). Perkins explains that the problem with optimism and pessimism is that they both maintain the centrality of human goals and values, whereas the *Zhuangzi* advocates "a radical rejection of the limits of human perspective."⁶² Perkins states, "The optimist goes furthest by projecting these [human] categories into the structure of the world itself. The pessimist, though, retains enough confidence to say that the world is *bad*.... One might fall back to a weaker position, not that the world is bad in some objective sense, but that it is necessarily *bad for us*. Even this assumption—which amounts to a claim about human nature—remains too committed to the human for *Zhuangzi*."⁶³ According to Perkins, optimism and pessimism miss the mark in that they fail to shed light beyond human interest, whereas *Zhuangzi* advocates a broader perspective. Perkins continues, arguing that in certain respects the *Zhuangzi* acknowledges pessimism in that it recognizes the indifferent nature of the world we live in. However, Perkins states, "The ultimate problem with pessimism is that it still takes human beings *seriously*."⁶⁴ In other words, while the *Zhuangzi* recognizes the indifferent nature of the world, it avoids pessimism by arguing that human beings need to transcend anthropocentric perspectives and stop attributing so much importance to our goals, values, and categories.

It is my contention that where Tao differs from the *Zhuangzi* is in Tao's inability to relinquish the seriousness of his existence. While Tao has his Zhuangzian moments he never remains committed to them for long. Building on Perkins' language, Tao is a pessimist in a weak

sense. He does not see the world as necessarily bad, but he does see it as *bad for him* in the sense that it offers no guarantees that he will live long enough to enjoy being himself (*ziran*), and neither does it guarantee that any memory of him will remain. We can go one step further given the poems quoted previously, including Tao's visit to the ruins in "Returning to Live on the Farmstead," and say that while Tao sees the world as indifferent to *his* desires, he believes the desire to remain—the desire to matter in the world—is widely shared among humans, and that our awareness of the limitations the world presents to fulfilling this desire imbue human life with a certain kind of grief.

Conclusion

The third poem in Tao's "Imitating Burial Songs" 〈擬挽歌辭〉 ties together the major themes of this study. Tao writes this series of poems from the perspective of the deceased as parts of the mourning rites occur, including the viewing, procession, and interment. This third poem describes the interment.⁶⁵

Wild grass grows on and on;
2 The leaves of poplar trees rustle in the wind.
Harsh frost falls in the ninth month;
4 They send me beyond the outskirts of town.
No one lives anywhere nearby;
6 Lofty tombs jut out all around.
The bier-pulling horses whinny as they look up to the sky;
8 The wind hums a mournful tune.
Once this dark room is closed

10 There will not be another morning for a thousand years.

There will not be another morning for a thousand years,

12 So what use is being worthy and great?

Those who came along to send me on my way

14 Have all returned to their homes.

Perhaps my relatives have some lingering sorrow,

16 But everyone else is already singing a happy tune.

After death, what can be said?

18 My body is lodged—at one with the mountainside.⁶⁶

Here, we again encounter wild grass threatening to cover human remains and the poet being buried in the ninth month. Also of relevance is the mountain that the poet's body is placed in. If Tao delights in nature—specifically mentioning mountains in “Returning to Live on the Farmstead”—one would expect a mountain to be a fitting place for him to “return.” Yet in this poem, nature is not so welcome. The tomb, set in the context of grass and mountains, is a lonely and isolated place. The isolation is expressed not only with regard to the fact that “no one lives anywhere nearby,” but also in the poet's description of his family and friends. The mourning rites at Tao's time discouraged people from singing, as singing was seen as an expression of joyful feelings not appropriate for mourning. The notion that people have already begun to sing suggests that they no longer have feelings of sorrow; that they no longer mourn for the deceased. Tao clearly desires to matter to others, and the poem elicits a somber mood as the poet realizes how hard it is to remain meaningful. Tao even seems to accept that he does not matter to the non-human world, as it will go on doing what it has always done, but he is particularly pained that even people who *can* remember will soon forget. The important thing here is that even in what

seems to be Tao's idyllic situation—resting in a bare room, removed from society, tucked away in a mountainside wilderness—Tao is still not at ease.

This article described Tao's views on being himself (*ziran*) and the natural transformations of the world (*hua*). His poetry reveals that the transformations of the world might with occasion present opportunities for joy when one is able to follow one's natural dispositions. However, they do not guarantee these opportunities; rather they create, change, and transform things in a process that is largely indifferent to human hopes and desires. Furthermore, human beings, as the most wise and aware of all things in the world are acutely conscious of our limited time to find a place to fit in; yet even if we are fortunate enough to find such a place, life is tinged with sorrow because we know that such a place is not permanent—in one generation the courts and markets change. When we die our memory will not last long. We live in a world that will cover what remains.

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¹ For a reception history of Tao see Swartz, *Reading Tao Yuanming*.

² On Tao's collected works see Tian, *Tao Yuanming and Manuscript Culture*, 289-298.

³ Yuan, *Tao Yuanming Ji*, 460. Hereafter, *TYMJ*. All translations are my own, although I am influenced by the translations of James Robert Hightower (*The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien*) and A. R. Davis (*T'ao Yüan-ming*).

⁴ *TYMJ*, 461.

⁵ For textual issues regarding this poem see Tian, *Manuscript Culture*, 96-110.

⁶ *TYMJ*, 76-89.

⁷ For a sampling of scholars who take this view see Lu, *Tao Yuanming*, 213, 145, 159-160, 35, and 170-171. For scholars writing in English see for example Palandri, "The Taoist Vision," and Cheung, "Two Forms of Solitude." In contrast to these views see Yuan, *Tao Yuanming yanjiu*, 4 and 6. It is also worth noting that for many traditional commentators the connection between *ziran* and Tao's poetry had little to do with the natural world and more to do with ease in expression. See Swartz, *Reading Tao Yuanming*, 204-211.

⁸ Lu, *The Ecological Era*, x.

⁹ Lu, *Tao Yuanming*, 257 and 273.

¹⁰ Lu, *The Ecological Era*, 31 (*Tao Yuanming*, 49).

¹¹ Lu, *The Ecological Era*, 31 (*Tao Yuanming*, 49).

¹² Lu, *The Ecological Era*, 133 (*Tao Yuanming*, 240).

¹³ Tian, *Manuscript Culture*, 101.

¹⁴ *TYMJ*, 59.

¹⁵ *TYMJ*, 67.

¹⁶ *TYMJ*, 556. See also the tenth poem in “Reading the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*” 〈讀山海經〉, *TYMJ*, 410.

¹⁷ For the various ways interpreters understand *ziran zhuyi* see Chen, *Tao Yuanming zhi renpin*, 407-414.

¹⁸ The fourth occurs in Tao’s biography of his grandfather (*TYMJ*, 492). There is also a fifth occurrence if one counts the biographies sometimes attributed to Tao (*TYMJ*, 570). On the authenticity of the latter see *TYMJ*, 597-600.

¹⁹ Harbsmeier, “Toward a Conceptual History,” 221.

²⁰ D’Ambrosio, “Rethinking Environmental Issues,” 411.

²¹ D’Ambrosio, “Rethinking Environmental Issues,” 410.

²² See Li, *Ziran sichao*.

²³ Similar themes occur in the eighth poem of “Imitating Old Poems” 〈擬古〉, *TYMJ*, 334.

²⁴ On this term see Sun, *Pearl from the Dragon’s Mouth*.

²⁵ Chang, *Six Dynasties Poetry*, 42.

²⁶ *TYMJ*, 59.

²⁷ *TYMJ*, 431.

²⁸ Qu, *Shangshu*, 182. This chapter in the *Shangshu* is long thought to be a forgery composed and added after the Zhou dynasty.

²⁹ On *qi* see Onozawa, *Ki no shisō*.

³⁰ *TYMJ*, 548.

³¹ On the genre *za* 雜 (“miscellaneous”) see Davis, *T’ao Yüan-ming*, vol. II, 125-129.

³² *TYMJ*, 338.

³³ *TYMJ*, 338.

³⁴ *TYMJ*, 344.

³⁵ *TYMJ*, 342.

³⁶ *TYMJ*, 352.

³⁷ *TYMJ*, 269.

³⁸ *TYMJ*, 271.

³⁹ *TYMJ*, 175.

⁴⁰ *TYMJ*, 541.

⁴¹ Cross reference “Encountering Fire in the Middle of the Sixth Month, 408” 〈戊申歲六月中
遇火〉, *TYMJ*, 219.

⁴² See *TYMJ*, 261, 352, and 555. This imagery is used long before Tao’s time. See, for instance,
the third and thirteenth poems in *Nineteen Old Poems*, Zhang, *Gushi Shijiushou*, 15 and 84.

⁴³ *TYMJ*, 13.

⁴⁴ *TYMJ*, 431.

⁴⁵ Coincidentally, the term for village (*xu* 墟) is graphically and phonetically similar to *xu* 虛
(graphically making an eye rhyme).

⁴⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁴⁷ For background on this poem see Davis, vol. I, 75-76 and *TYMJ*, 168-169.

⁴⁸ Literally, “Moved as the swift horses reach the sorrowful spring,” which is likely a reference
to images in the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi*, the latter of which suggests the setting of the sun
(*TYMJ*, 169-170).

⁴⁹ Duke Mu is quoted in the *Shangshu* (Qu, *Shangshu*, 147) endorsing the hiring of elderly
statesmen.

⁵⁰ *TYMJ*, 167.

⁵¹ Wu, *Shisanjing yiyi*, 5.417.

⁵² *TYMJ*, 224.

⁵³ For more on this day see Davis, “The Double Ninth Festival.”

⁵⁴ See, for instance, “An Outing to Xie Brook” 〈遊斜川〉 (*TYMJ*, 91); “Drinking Alone in Continuous Rain” 〈連雨獨飲〉 (*TYMJ*, 125); and “An Elegy for My Cousin, Jingyuan” 〈祭從弟敬遠文〉 (*TYMJ*, 547-548).

⁵⁵ This refers to Huan Tui (c. 500 BCE) from the state of Song, who supposedly spent years constructing an elaborate stone coffin. See Lau, *Liji*, 3.70/18/5-14.

⁵⁶ This refers to Yang Wangsun (c. 100 BCE), who wanted to be buried completely naked. See Ban, *Hanshu*, 669.

⁵⁷ *TYMJ*, 556.

⁵⁸ See, for instance, Lau, *Zhuangzi*, 6/16/25-26, 6/18/4-5, and 6/16/5-12.

⁵⁹ Lau, *Zhuangzi*, 6/17/23.

⁶⁰ Lau, *Zhuangzi*, 6/17/30-31. English translation influenced by Watson, *Zhuangzi*, 81.

⁶¹ Lau, *Zhuangzi*, 6/18/5-7. English translation largely follows Watson, *Zhuangzi*, 81-82.

⁶² Perkins, “Wandering Beyond Tragedy,” 90.

⁶³ Perkins, “Wandering Beyond Tragedy,” 91.

⁶⁴ Perkins, “Wandering Beyond Tragedy,” 91.

⁶⁵ Davis explains this genre in *T'ao Yüan-ming*, vol. I, 165-172.

⁶⁶ *TYMJ*, 424-425.