

POEMS OF THE DAO



Zhan Qiao, Li Ang Rui-Quing and Selwyn Pritchard

POEMS OF THE TAO

We are indebted to Distinguished Professor Emeritus
Tan Shilin, our mentor, for what is right herein, and beg his
indulgence for what is not..



*We have to submit to the permanent relationships of things and the universal texture of human life ...
To submit to this inexorable, unifying pattern is to find truth and peace. Tolstoy.*

When we lived in the Orkney Islands we found ourselves among monuments from Neolithic times: Skarabrae, a cluster of houses from 4500 BCE; stone circles which predicted not only the rise of prominent stars, but also the moon's orbital perturbations due to Venus's gravitational influence; Maeshowe, a belly of grassed earth which contained a corbelled stone chamber in which the bones of the tribe were preserved. Through a tunnel exactly aligned, at the winter solstice, the setting sun penetrated and lit the bones with blood red light, so the year turned, the crops and babies grew. In a crazy, alienated and anomic world, it was sobering to stand amongst these monuments of a society older than the pyramids, which was not only in harmony with the Earth and its seasons, but with the cosmos also.

Six thousand years later, the Earth is commodified in US dollars and our 'developed' cultures are alienated from, and careless of, the world and its flora and fauna. The commercial prospects of the planets and their moons are being researched and this rapacious attitude is claimed to be natural, that is, 'human nature.' It is, of course, systemic. We can behave otherwise if we can change the system. We can choose; we are not entirely subject to the forces of instinct, nor those which form our class consciousness. Charles Marx, who lived most of his life in London, came from the well-to-do bourgeoisie but came to think that humanity must eventually escape the chains of economic determinism, of the labour market which prices the utility of lives, sells soccer players like slaves, and makes us define ourselves in terms of our work, or lack of it. It is possible now, mathematically, if the jumbo load of plutocrats who own more than half the world's wealth could be persuaded to distribute it equably!

In the lives of the Bunurong, who inhabited the peninsula where I live,



work occupied a few hours of hunting and collecting each day and, although we look at huge Neolithic monuments in terms of their labour costs, they may have been a leisure activity. What did they do with the rest of their lives? Watch surfies! How well we can sell our working days is our essence: the good life' is a flash car and a swimming pool, a big telly full of the efficacy of American violence and sport, and too much to eat and drink. There have been, and are, rejections of this oppression, by individuals and communities, but even in the face of clear environmental dangers, the vested interests will

not let go. Monopoly Capitalism increasingly concentrates in the hands of plutocrats and their satraps whose greed is unconscionable. And 'The cash-register stands upon the ash heap' (William Morris) in the ruins of liberal democracy. People are mesmerised by images which provoke needless desires and anxieties which spin into their homes, hearts and minds to make them biddable. Questions about the meaning of life are risible and hopeless. (I am aware that this kind of rumination also seems *de trop*, but: *The weight of this sad time we must obey;/ Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say,*' King Lear, W.S.) In Australia, which joined in an illegal, immoral and stupid assault on Iraq, with concomitant war crimes, for a 'free' trade deal with the United States, a duplicitous government which refuses to reconcile with the indigenous population or with our geographic position in Asia, has just been re-elected for a fourth term. History has taught us nothing.

*

In the Tao, (The Way) the ancient Chinese prescription for good life, we find echoes of some fundamental truths: contention and contentment do not go together; fame is a mirage; the 'good life' is self-sufficient farming in harmony with nature. Until the last century these tenets, with Confucian and Buddhist accretions, were basic to dynastic Chinese culture. Unlike Buddhism, the Tao was not focused on other-worldly aims; unlike Confucianism, it was not a matter of prescribing familial and civic virtues of service to the state.

The music and rhyming of Mandarin are inimitable. I have used a word per character in these translations with Zhan Qiao, because such concision is familiar to us via the Tang and then Japanese forms and the Imagists, and the sine qua non is to present an English poem.

*

Zhan Qiao (Jo-Jo), my collaborator and ex-student, now on the faculty of the College of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Jinan University, writes:

‘I think you’d better mention Lao-zu and Chuang-tzu, the two ancient philosophers who founded Taoism, and whose ideas have a great impact on Chinese artists and arts throughout Chinese history. [Gentle reader, you can summon these sages from the vasty deep of cyberzee with Google! S.] In fact, the aesthetic of Chinese arts is mostly based on Taoism, or in other words, on Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu’s philosophy: profound meanings implicitly conveyed through a few seemingly random images; the vast blank in a Chinese water colour painting that represents the whole universe; the make-believe settings in a Chinese opera, etc, all these reflect the Taoist idea that the infinite can and can only be achieved by way of the finite. I cannot find any evidence as to how those poems managed to survive, but I think in the old days, people liked to copy poems and that is why some poems have several different versions and some words are missing. What’s more, calligraphy has always been a very important art, especially in ancient times. Good poems were copied again and again from generation to generation. I suppose that is how they survive till today.

As to ‘Dao’ and ‘Tao’, both are being used. According to the Chinese pronunciation, ‘Tao’ is more accurate, but I don’t know which one is more popular in the West. If I say Daoism, will everyone recognise it?’

Tao Yuan Ming (365-427 CE)

Why do we need heaven when we have the Earth?

His great grandfather was made Duke of Changsha by the Emperor of the Eastern Jin dynasty(317-420); his grandfather was Prefect of Wuchang province; his father was Prefect of Ancheng - but Tao Yuan Ming, after ten years' as an official, turned away from power and wealth, preferring to till his thirty mu of fields beneath the Lushan mountains. In this he was following the scholarly hermit who returned to the reality of nature and its seasonal disciplines, and to music, calligraphy and poetry, as the foundations of the good life - the Tao or Way. Poverty drove him back to become a county magistrate, but this distasteful duty ended after a few months with his mother's death. He went into secluded mourning for her and never again returned to official life.

On my return to office, as I Passed Tuku on my way to Jiangling In the seventh lunar month of the year 401

Thirty years of leisured life
Have left me aloof, estranged.
The Classics shaped me, but
Gardens and woods are my world.
What madness to forsake them
And leave for distant Jin!

We sailed under the moon.
'Farewell!' I waved to friends.
Breezes came as twilight dimmed,
The moonlit night was clear.

The silver river flowed under
The golden heavens, but my
Duties took away my sleep -
In solitude night's hours passed.
Pursuit of high office sickens,
My heart longs for home.

I must doff this hat,
This lucrative post, go back
To nurture my real self
And maintain my good name.

**Two Poems in response to those
of Secretary Guo**

1

A wood before my house
Provides some shade in summer.
In season South winds blow
To tug my coat open.
I revel in my solitude:
Calligraphy, music delight me.

Vegetables thrive and the barn's
Full of last year's grain.
I want for nothing, needs
are few. I husk millet
to make myself sweet wine.
My child plays by me,
Babbles and tries to speak.

Pure joy in all of this.
I forget rank and wealth,
Watch white clouds drift away,
But yearn for the past.

Spring brought the timely rain,
Then Autumn these crisp days
When frost clears mist and
The sky is a deep blue,
Mountains rise to fantastic heights
And the panorama rolls away.

Chrysanthemums light up the woods,
And the green pines crown
The high cliff: these endure
The sharpest weather. I drink
To them, my ideal - for
A millennium the hermit's dream!
But I have fallen short,
Sadly watch the season fade.

The Flow of Time

As the seasons flow,
So one spring day,
Dressed in light clothes,
I strolled the meadows.
Haze lifted from the hills,
faintly veiling the zenith;
A soft, southerly breeze
Made shoot's wings quiver.

By the broad lake
I washed my feet.
The plain rolled away
And I was overjoyed,
To know heart's ease...
As people often say,
'Free men know content':
I toasted my happiness.
In the river's heart
I glimpsed limpid Yi,
Heard men and boys
Chanting again after school –
All day and night
I loved that sound...
Those times are gone,
Remote; cannot be revived.
Day in and out
At home I stay.
My herbs and flowers
Are shaded by bamboo.
My harp to hand,
Wine jug half-full...
Old days are lost,
Nostalgic is my grief.

Back to Country Life

From youth I've stood apart,
rejoicing in mountains and hills.

Caught up in public life
I was away thirteen years:
Caged birds long for woods,
Fish in ponds for streams.

Down South I plough waste,
Happy humbly working my land.

My plot boasts ten mu,
My cottage has nine rooms.
Elms, willows shade the back,
Peach and plum the yard.

The Distant villages lie hidden,
Their smoke curls from haze.

Dogs bark in the lanes,
Cocks crow in the mulberry.
My tidy home is clean
With peaceful and ample rooms.

I was caged for years,
Back I have found my way.

Fire In the Sixth Month of 408

In a thatched cottage on
A narrow lane I lived.
At midsummer wild winds blew:
My home disappeared in flames.

We sheltered in our boat.
At dusk in early autumn
A waxing moon hung high.
Fruit and vegetables had regrown
But scared birds had fled.

Late at night and alone
I stared at distant stars.
Aloof, awkward as a boy,
I'm forty in a flash.
My strength will ebb, but
My spirit is at peace.
Integrity is a virtue as
Hard as the uncut jade.

I recall the golden age
When harvests ran to surplus,
People patted their full bellies,
Slept from dusk to dawn.
I was born too late!

I must tend my plot.

Moving House

South village was always where
I wanted most to live
Among these true-hearted folk,
Spending my days in talk.
For years I dreamed it,
And now the dream is real.

A roof over my bed,
I've no need for more.
Neighbours will call on me
And speak of past events,
Relishing curious old texts
And teasing out the truth.

Drinking Wine V

My hut's built among men,
But I live in silence.
How can that be so?
When mind's serene, world's remote!

I pick chrysanthemums and gaze
At the tranquil Southern Range,
Beautiful in the sunset's clouds.
Birds flock down to roost.

I sense earth's profound truth's
Too deep for our words.

Drinking Wine XII

Chan Gong's post at court
Was lost by his integrity.
He found seclusion, kept away
From politics. Zhong Li retired,
Cleared off to the lakes,
Was honoured for his nobility.

Once out, don't turn back!
Why hesitate? Just leave, go!
Make a clean break from
The world's mischief and peoples'
Dumb chatter. Trust the feelings
of your own quiet heart.

**A life of leisure on the ninth day
of the ninth lunar month, 419**

Life is brief, but desires
Are many: we desire longevity.
The seasons bring this day,
This relished festival once more.
Dew is heavy, when summer's
Breezes fade on calm days.
From serene skies swallows
Leave, geese honk their return.

Wine soothes my fretting;
Chrysants my increasing years.
Why should the needy scholar
Let slip this day unlived?
My dusty cup stands by
The empty jar – without wine
Chrysanthemums bloomed in vain!
Gathering my gown I sing,
My heart full of joy,
My leisured life content,
Something achieved in living thus.

Nb Chrysanthemums withstand frost and were thought to be an
Elixir in wine. Without wine, the poet must have chewed them

Poems of Destitute Scholars

4

Those content with plain living
Remember Qian Lou for centuries.
He rejected high office, gifts.
By his death bed mourners
Stood shocked at his rags
Which hardly covered his corpse.
He was not unaware of
His state, but devoted to
The Tao. For a millennium
No one's been like him.
Born to justice and humanity,
He died without any regret.

420

Reading 'Mountains and Seas'

In early summer all flourishes –
Trees shade my cottage roof
And in them birds rejoice
Like me in my home.

With fields ploughed and sown,
I've time to read, write,
And my narrow, humble lane's
Too narrow for friends' carriages.

Alone I sip spring brew
And gather up my vegetables,
Showers come from the east
On balmy breezes, whilst I
Browse King Mu stories and
The illustrated 'Mountains and Seas':
All of space and time
Are in my joyful grasp.

Begging

Hunger drove me from home –
I didn't know where to.
I knocked at a door
And stammered my excuse.
My host saw my need,
Gave me food and drink.
Into the night we talked,
Drinking down our refilled cups.
Delighted with our happy friendship,
We composed poems and sang...
My deepest thanks are all
I offer, to my shame.
I fear that any gratitude
Must await the afterlife!

The three great poets of the Tang dynasty are often sorted as Buddhist (Wang Wei), Confucian (Do Fu) and Taoist (Li Bo), but all three exhibit the meditative delight in natural and simple life ('Thisness', 'Mindfulness') and escaped the life of officialdom - as did Su Shi of the subsequent Song dynasty. In these translations, many earlier versions of which were done with Zhan Qiao and Liang Ruiqing, also of Jinan University, and which appeared in LUNAR FROST published by Brandl and Schlesinger (books@brandl.com.au) of Sydney in 2000, I employed one syllable per character. (A character is a monosyllable which can be pronounced four ways, each way referring to something different: ma can mean mother, horse, shirt or hashish, depending upon the way it is said. These four inflexions allow the singing quality of Chinese verse.) There are five poems from each of these poets.

Wang Wei (701-761)

At the age of twenty, he was one of the top candidates in the gruelling national civil service examinations but after some time political misfortune sent him into retirement. He came from a sophisticated background, but his poems and paintings, music and calligraphy, reflect the simplicity and purity of country life.

Autumn Evening

Autumn evening:
empty hills fresh-washed;
in pines a bright moon;
streams flow clear on stones.

Girls sing; bamboo creaks;
Boats stir lotus blooms.
Spring's fragrance is lost,
But here I shall stay.

Deer Park

Mountain silence ... Faint
voices. In deep woods
low sun slants through trunks,
lights emerald moss.

To See Yuan Erh off as Envoy to An-Hsi

Morning rain settles the dust.
By the inn the willows thrive.
“One for the road, dear old friend –
soon no one will drink your health!”

After Prolonged Rain

After rain, forest silence.
Smoke curls, but the food is late
for those in the misty paddy.
White egrets fly. Orioles
sing in summer trees, while I
consider the hibiscus,
chew dewy mallows and trust
the powerful forget me.

Answer to Magistrate Zhang

Old, I prefer peace:
affairs don't fret me.
I have ambition
only for these woods.

Pine winds tug my sash,
moonlight gilds my lute.
'Fortune's path?' Sing deep
songs to the river!

Li Bo
(701-762)

He was born in today's Kazakhstan. A large, hard-drinking womaniser, his spirited and wild imagination brought him fame, but his life at court was consequently brief and he spent his life as a vagrant. Close to Taoist adepts, his poetry suggests life is a timeless dream, reveals hatred of feudal nobility and compassion for the suffering of the poor. Almost a thousand poems survive him.

Saying Goodbye to Meng Haoran
At the Yellow Crane Tower

“Goodbye old friend!” Third Moon mist
and flowers are all around
as your sail turns to blue sky.
Yangtse flows on unperturbed.

Bitter Love

She lifts the bead screen,
sits with angry brow.
I see her tears stream.
Who has earned her spleen?

Drinking With A Hermit

We drink and flowers bloom –
One cup, another ... again.

“Go, I must sleep. Tomorrow
bring your zither just the same.”

Failing to Find a Taoist Priest In the Daitian Mountans

Dogs bark, water bubbles, dew
shines on peach blossoms. A glimpse
of deer in the deep woods, but at
noon by the brook, no bell rings
from the temple. Green bamboo
against blue haze; from cliffs streams
arc. No one knows where he is.
I loiter amongst the pines.

Responding to a Question in the Mountains

“What’s the point in perching there?”

My answer, a peaceful smile.
Peach Blossom Springs for such men,
are mile upon mile upon mile.

Do Fu
(712-770)

The 'God of Poetry', lost office several times during a drifting and wretched life, but produced poetry of such lyricism, depth and classical allusion that he remains the pre-eminent poet of China, still delighting people today. He could barely support his family and one of his children died of starvation in times of turmoil when the An-Shi rebellion separated him from them.

Delight in Spring Rain

Timely, in season,
spring rain drenches the earth
On spring night's soft winds,
when clouds snag wild paths
and boats' red lights bloom.

At dawn all Chengdu
will find red flowers.

The Prospect in Spring

Our state has gone, but
streams, hills go on. In
streets flowers weep; trees,
weeds grow rank ; birds shock
my heart. Three months of
war. Mail is like gold.
My hair turns white, sparse,
cannot hold a pin.

Wartime Moon

Tonight a Fuzhou moon
my lonely wife sees.
My innocents cannot
grasp I'm in Changan.

Her fragrant hair is damp,
her jade pale arms chill.
When will we both lean,
look up, tears drying?

To Minister Hua

Chengdu sings and pipes all day –
the river's breath, cloudy tunes:
imperial music that
Commoners so seldom hear!

Night Thoughts on the River

Soft winds sway grasses
and my mast amongst stars
low over wide plains,
the bright moon surging.

Poetry brings no fame.
My career folds. Old,
sick, I drift downstream
like a lonely gull.

Su Shi
(1036-1101)

Su Shi (Su Dong Po) of the Song Dynasty had a ‘snakes and ladders’ life. He began on the top rung of the imperial examinations, but then his poetry offended and he was exiled to Hubei; he was recalled, but then exiled for his politics to Guandong. At sixty-three another snake took him to Hainan Island. Again he was recalled to court but died a year later. He was a painter and calligrapher of distinction and a great poet. Two thousand seven hundred poems and three hundred song lyrics survive him.

Composed on the Lake Tower while Drunk
On the 27th Day of the Sixth Moon

I

Ink black clouds spill, blot out peaks.
Bouncing pearls of rain spatter the boats,
then in an instant the wind makes all clear.
Look, under the tower the water’s reflecting the sky!

II

Turtles and fish follow freely in our wake
as we float by fair lotus beds on their sanctuary lake.
From my pillow I watch mountains bow their heads,
Our boat takes the course that the rippling moons take.

Hunting at Mixhou

At forty a last wild flourish, yellow hound
on my left, black hawk
on my right wrist, silk capped,
fur-coated, with a thousand horse
I sweep the hillocky plain. Townsfolk flock
to watch their tiger-hunting magistrate.

Strong wine expands my heart. Who cares
about a few grey hairs? Make me an imperial envoy!
with pennants flying
I'll bend my bow like the full moon and aim
North-West, shoot down that fierce sky wolf!

Nb. Barbarian invasions came from the North-West.

In The Lonely Mountains to Meet the Monks Huiqin and Huisi on the 8th day of the 12th Moon

Clouds hang heavy with snow
over the clear lake where light
picks out the tower, then is gone.

The mountains lour, are lost,
but the water turns transparent –
each green boulder, every fish distinct.
Not one soul in the birdsung woods.

**Dream of My Dead Wife
On the Night of the 20th Day
Of the First Month, 1075**

Ten years in separate worlds,
I seldom
think of you, but do not forget.

Your grave's far away –
too far to grieve. If we met
you would not know
my worn face.

Tonight a dream of home, you
brush your hair under our
small window, we
stare. Shining tears speak.
Each year I weep as the moon
rises white
from your mound.