THE CHARACTER OF A CHINESE SCHOLAR-OFFICIAL AS ILLUSTRATED BY THE LIFE AND POETRY OF T'AO YUAN-MING*

By A. R. Davis

WHEN men from the West, in quest for Cathay, succeeded in penetrating into the China of the sixteenth century, among the wonders which they found and reported to Europe, one of the most astonishing was a human phenomenon, the Chinese scholar-official. I make little apology for this somewhat cumbersome term, because, if he were an object of wonder to the Western world, it is hardly surprising that our Western vocabulary should lack a satisfactory equivalent. Literatus, bureaucrat, mandarin are all inaccurate and often adversely coloured terms. Nor do I think particularly happy the current favourite which is used to describe the former Chinese governing class, the gentry. So may I say scholar-official; for it was because scholars were the officials and the officials were scholars that Voltaire admired China's government. Though he was mistaken in thinking China truly to be under the rule of philosophers, we, in our own iconoclastic age, may equally err, if, carrying back our modern quarrels into history, we think too much in terms of wicked landlords, rapacious and corrupt taxgathers, scheming politicians.

But it is not my intention here to defend a class of men which must down the centuries have numbered millions, the good and the bad. In Western Sinological studies the facile generalization is becoming less easy, and this is a mark of progress. We do now at least realise the immensity of our sources. I shall mainly treat one individual, and where I seem to suggest some general characteristics in the particular, I would like you to think that I do so with reservation.

The foundations of the power of the scholar-officials were laid in the Early Han dynasty in the second century B.C. and their authority persisted down to our own times. Of course, as with most institutions of the " unchanging China " of popular belief, the scholar-official society required many centuries of development before it achieved the form in which the Jesuit fathers found it in the sixteenth century. For example the examination system which provided the method of entry into public service, though it had Han beginnings is not recognisable in its later form before the sixth or seventh centuries. However, the most essential and distinguishing features of this society were present from the first. These were the ownership of land and the possession of learning. The ownership of land gave the scholar-official his material security, his home-base to which he could retire when the situation of court politics

* Inaugural Lecture delivered by Professor A. R. Davis, M.A. (Cambridge), on 22nd March, 1956. Professor Davis has observed that " this lecture was addressed to a non-Sinologist audience, and so is not intended as a piece of Sinology. It does, however, seek to illustrate one point which perhaps has not received proper attention : the Confucian element in T'ao Yüan-ming's thinking.

dictated. The possession of learning gave him his moral strength and his distinctness in history. For the learning in question was of a peculiar sort. It consisted in the detailed knowledge of the Confucian scriptures, first canonized in the Han period. It may seem strange to apply words such as "scripture" and "canonized" to Confucianism which is so often described as only a system of ethics. But, while it is true that Confucianism had no ecclesiastical organisation comparable with Buddhism and later Taoism, I think that we in the West can fully apprehend the nature of it only in religious and theological terms. The thinking of the Han Confucians was scriptural in character, as was the subsequent great rethinking of the Sung Confucians in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when substantial Buddhist and Taoist elements were absorbed. Confucianism was not lacking in cosmography; Heaven was as important as Earth in its total conception but all its thinking was within a social context. It is this feature that makes it difficult for us whose religious ideas are so strongly concerned with individual personality.

Wolfram Eberhard in his *History of China*, although he is not uncritical of the formation and maintenance of what he calls the gentry society, has this to say of its adoption of Confucianism:

> "The Confucian moral system gave a Chinese official or any member of the gentry a spiritual attitude and an outward bearing which, in their best representatives, has always preserved its possessors and in consequence Chinese society as a whole from moral collapse, from spiritual nihilism and has thus contributed to the preservation of Chinese cultural values in spite of all foreign conquerors".[1]

This is a striking but not exaggerated tribute and only in the last few decades has it lost some of its relevance.

The scholar-official class has in our own times lost its basis in agricultural land before the onslaught first of Western capitalism and then of Western Marxism. But, though at the same time the descendants of this class have largely deserted their ancestral faith, I should doubt whether the moral force of Confucianism is quite exhausted or its spiritual capital is utterly consumed.

With this brief attempt to sketch a setting, I come now to my foreground figure, T'ao Yüan-ming who lived from 365 to 427A.D. in an age when North China had been lost to foreign invaders and the Chinese dynasty was confined in and south of the Yangtse valley. T'ao's life was passed during the declining years of a dynasty when great families struggled with one another to found a new power, a time of warring cliques, of violence and murder where death was the all too commonplace end of the political loser.

To Sinologists it might seem curious to choose as a representative of the scholar-official class so notable a "failure" as T'ao Yüan-ming who is remembered first as one of China's greatest poets and secondly for his dislike of public life. However, perhaps "failures" may be as instructive subjects of study as "successes".

[1] English ed., p. 79.

Further, while I do not dispute in any way T'ao's psychological unsuitability for the hypocrisies of public life, most particularly of the time when he lived, I do not think that we can have a proper understanding of his personality and of the implication of much of his writing unless we view him against the background of his class and its traditions.

He belonged probably to a lesser and rather impoverished branch of a family whose importance had declined. He was not unproud of his family's tradition of public office. In a poem in which he rather dubiously traces back his ancestry to remotest antiquity, we find him writing of his famous great-grandfather[2] who had been one of the highest officers of state and his grandfather who was governor of a large city and its surrounding territory:

Martial was Ch'ang-sha,[3]
Oh, his merits, oh, his virtue.
The emperor asked of us
That we take charge of the subjection of the southern states.[4]

When his work was done, he retired to his home;
In a position of favour he was free from error.
Who shall say that such a spirit
Can still be found nowadays?

Grave was my grandfather,[5]
He was "careful of the end as of the beginning",[6]
He was "straight and square" towards the Three Great Officers,[7]
He was gracious and agreeable to a thousand *li*.[8]

Oh, august was my virtuous father,
He was dispassionate and empty.[9]
He made his way among wind and clouds,
He cast aside these pains and pleasures.

(Charge to My Son, st. 5–6, *Works*, c. 1.)

[2] T'ao K'an (257–332 A.D.).

[3] T'ao K'an was made Duke of Ch'ang-sha in 329. T'ao Yüan-ming's line is based on one in the *Book of Songs*, Song No. 294, but the word used for "martial" is also a play on T'ao K'an's posthumous name which is written with the same character.

[4] T'ao K'an was appointed General for pacifying the South (*P'ing-nan chiang-chün*) at the beginning of the *T'ai-hsing* period, c. 318.

[5] According to all the biographies of T'ao, his grandfather's name was Mao and he was Governor of Wu-ch'ang.

[6] Quotation from *Lao-tzu*, c. 64.

[7] There is a great difference of opinion among commentators about the reading of this line, which I cannot treat here. I am reading *san* "three" instead of *erh* "two" of the current text. *San* is noted as a variant in the Tseng Chi edition. *Chih-fang* "straight and square" is from *I-ching*, hexagram 2.

[8] *i.e.* the area of his governorship.

[9] The characteristics of a Taoist saint, *cf. Chuang-tzu*, c. 15, "the saint . . . is empty and dispassionate, so he conforms with the virtue of Heaven . . . There is nothing with which he is at odds, this is the height of emptiness, he has no contact with things, this is the height of dispassionateness".

The last four lines provide us with an indication that T'ao's father of whom we know almost nothing, not even for certain his name, had, like his son, grown disgusted and withdrawn from public life. But to return to T'ao himself. The last event in his public career, which he immortalized by his famous piece, *Return Home* ! has tended to obscure every other part of it and has left an impression upon popular imagination that he took up office only to leave it at the earliest possible moment.

In 405 he accepted and in some eighty days resigned from the post of magistrate of a small town. This was his last appearance in public office. His official biography in the dynastic histories gives an amusing anecdote to explain his resignation. It is stated that he refused to make a courtesy call on a visiting inspector, saying : " How can I for the sake of five pecks of rice bow before a country bumpkin ?" The same day he untied the ribbon of his official seal and quit his post. But this *is* only a pleasing anecdote because we have T'ao's own words on the subject in the introduction he wrote to *Return Home* !

> " My family was poor and ploughing and planting were not able to supply my needs. Young children filled the house but in the jar was no store of grain. I had not discovered the art by which generation after generation had supported themselves. My relatives and friends many times urged me to become a local official. Suddenly it became my desire but there was no way open for me to seek it. I had already seen service in every quarter, and various lords of their graciousness and love had been good to me. My uncle grieved at my poverty and so I was appointed to a small town. At the time the situation was not calm and my mind shrank away from public service. P'eng-tse was a hundred *li* from my home, but the harvest of the public field was sufficient for making wine and so I took the post. After a few days I had feelings of longing to return home. Why was this ? My nature is spontaneous ; it cannot be forced or coerced. Though hunger and cold are pressing, to oppose myself makes me ill. When I do the service of others, it is always my mouth and belly that serve for their own sake. Thus I was sad and miserable and deeply ashamed on account of my former ideals. I still expected to stay for one year and then gather up my skirts and go by night. But soon my younger sister Ch'eng died at Wu-ch'ang and my feeling was to hurry away. So I resigned my post. From mid-autumn to winter, I had been in office for something over eighty days. I had availed myself of the event to follow my wish. I named the piece " Return Home !" It was the eleventh month of the year *I-ssu* (December, 405).
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> (*Works*, c. 5.)

Two statements here I would underline. " I had already seen service in every quarter " and " at the time the situation was not calm and my mind shrank away from public service ". With regard to the first we can discover from his surviving work that T'ao had before 405 been involved in public affairs for some ten years with

intervals of retirement. In these years the legitimate emperor had been supplanted by a usurper and restored again, but only as a puppet in the hands of a general who finally some fifteen years later founded a new dynasty with himself as emperor. T'ao had clearly been an eyewitness at the centre of the conflict through his service on the personal staffs of various generals. We can imagine why he writes that " the situation was not calm and my mind shrank from public service ". Throughout this period his poems show his unhappiness. For example :

In my youth I lived apart from affairs ;
I took my pleasure from my lute and books.
Though my cloth was coarse, I delighted in possessing myself.
Though " often empty ",[10] I was always at peace.
But time brought an unlucky juncture
When, loosing my reins, I stopped in the main thoroughfare.
I threw away my staff and ordered preparations for morning departure.
For a while I should be separated from my garden and fields.

Into the distance the solitary boat goes,
Continually thoughts of returning home come.
My journey surely cannot be thought but far ;
I have climbed and descended for more than a thousand *li*.
When my eyes grow weary of the strangeness of the river and the road,
My mind recalls my life among the hills and valleys.
Gazing at the clouds, I am mortified by the high-flying birds,
Surveying the waters, I feel shamed by the darting fish.[11]

Since true thoughts have from the first existed in my breast,
Who shall say that I am bound within the body's form ?
For the present then I shall submit myself to whatever comes,
But in the end I shall return to Pan's dwelling.[12]

(Written when Passing through Ch'ü-o, while Beginning my Service as Aide to the General, *Works*, c. 3.)

[10] " Often empty " is from *Lun-yü* 11–18, where it refers to the poverty of Confucius' disciple, Yen Hui.

[11] It has been suggested that T'ao's source for these two lines is in *Chuang-tzu* 23, " Birds and beasts do not grow weary of the heights, fishes and turtles do not grow weary of the depths. So the man who would complete his body's life, hides his person and simply does not weary of deep retirement ". This may well be but T'ao develops his thought in a different direction. He is made ashamed by the birds and fishes which keep to their natural element while he has left his own. Yet he goes on to maintain in the following lines that his true self is unchanged.

[12] " Pan's dwelling " is a reference to Pan Ku's *Yu-t'ung fu* in which his father Pan Piao is described, " finally he preserved himself and handed down an example. He dwelt where the highest goodness resided ".

After 405 he came to a decision to withdraw from public life, a properly Confucian decision. For it was a Confucian dictum that if the true Way did not prevail in the world, the gentleman might retire. One ought not to compromise. But it was a decision that would tend to leave doubts in the mind. And this I would stress is a most vital point in the understanding of T'ao as a man and as a poet. If he was the sensitive, sincere and thoughtful person whom all his writings manifest, he did not wear his Confucian learning and the traditions of his class as a cloak lightly to be put off. They must have penetrated his spirit and conditioned his thinking. So that, having left, as he would put it " the main thoroughfare " of public service, the path of duty for the " narrow lane " of retirement, he would feel the need for self-justification. This self-justification would operate in two directions: he had to justify his withdrawal from public life and also his former participation. And this is just what we find him doing. His justification for the past was that poverty and hunger, the need to provide for his family had driven him.

> In the past I travelled far
> Right up to the bay of the Eastern Sea.
> The road was distant and long,
> The wind and waves barred me in mid-course.
> On this journeying what sent me ?
> It seems that it was hunger drove me on.
> I exerted all my strength to achieve a full belly,
> And a little was to me a surplus.
> But I feared that this was no honourable plan,
> And I stopped my carriage and returned to retirement.

(*Drinking Wine*, Poem X, *Works*, c. 3.)

On the other side he justifies himself time and again by historical examples. To quote one instance:

> Ch'ang-kung[13] was once in official service,
> But, firm in his principles, he suddenly lost his season.
> He shut his gate and did not go out again ;
> Until the end of his life, he renounced the world.
> Chung-li[14] returned home to Ta-che ;

[13] Ch'ang-kung is the courtesy-name of Chang Chih, son of Chang Shih-chih (2nd Ct. B.C.). He has the following brief notice at the end of his father's biography in *Shih-chi* 102 (repeated in *Han-shu* 50) : " in public office he attained the rank of Great-Officer but retired because he was unable to curry favour with his contemporaries. So until the end of his life he did not take office (again) ".

[14] Chung-li is the courtesy-name of Yang Lun who has a biography among the Confucian scholars in *Hou-Han-shu* 109*A*. It is written of him there : " his ideals were at variance with those of his age so that he was unable to serve in the world. So he gave up his office and did not accept appointment again. The provincial authorities ordered him to teach at Ta-che. His disciples numbered more than a thousand ".

> His high renown began from this time.
> When once one has gone away, that must be an end.
> Wherefore should one again be in doubt ?
> Away ! Away ! What more is there to say ?
> The age's fashion has long been of mutual deception.
> Cast away long-drawn-out chatter !
> Pray follow where I have gone.

(*Drinking Wine*, Poem XII, *Works*, c. 3.)

The continual return to this theme by T'ao shows that it was truly a matter of spiritual doubt and the presence of such doubt seems to be only explicable against a Confucian background.

Sometimes, however, he represents himself in a different manner as in the next poem. This has superficial similarity to *Written when Passing through Ch'ü-o*, quoted above but reveals some differences of attitude. This poem is generally considered, and I think correctly,† to have been written after his final retirement :

> In my youth I was out of harmony with the vulgar rhythm ;
> My nature is essentially in love with hills and mountains.
> Yet mistakenly I fell into the Dusty Net,
> And once gone, I was away ten years.[15]
> The chained bird longs for its old forest,
> The fish in the pool thinks of its former depths.
> I have opened up the wilderness at the edge of the Southern heath ;
> I have kept my rusticity and returned to my garden and fields.
> My square homestead covers ten acres and more,
> My thatched house has eight or nine rooms.
> Elm and willows shade the rear eaves,
> Peaches and plums are arrayed before the hall.
> Faint are the villages of distant men,
> Thick is the smoke from the houses.
> Dogs bark in the deep lanes,
> Cocks crow at the tops of the mulberries.
> Within my doors and court there is no dust and confusion,
> In the empty house there is more than enough leisure.
> Long have I been within the cage,
> Now again I have succeeded in returning to Nature.

(*On Returning to Live in the Country*, Poem I, *Works*, c. 2.)

† Additional Note (December, 1957). I have now modified my opinion on the dating of this and the two preceding poems. My view of T'ao's position, which they were chosen to illustrate, remains unaffected.

[15] This line requires a great deal of consideration which it is not possible to give here. can only state that I am adopting the emendation of T'ao Chu of *i* for *san*.

Here the thought has nothing Confucian but is T'aoist in colour. Lin Yü-t'ang has suggested somewhere that every Chinese was a Confucian in public life and a Taoist in private. While like most generalizations this will not bear being pressed too far, there *are* two answers that a man must make to life, the social and the individual. Confucianism could provide the social answer and affected T'ao no less than many others. Though he lived the last twenty years out of office, he never lost interest in the world's affairs, and his concern remains to be seen in his poems of protest, inevitably couched in veiled terms, for protest in such an age as his was dangerous. But his withdrawal gave him leisure for thought about the individual anwer and to become one of China's greatest pastoral poets. So I must finally try to round off the impression by showing a little of this side of his character.

In an age where China's power had contracted, of great political instability, thought tended to turn inwards and the individual answer was increasingly sought. Those who followed the magical beliefs of Taoism, pursued the elixir of immortality, while others learnt the vanity of human life and hoped for recompense in the next by adhering to Buddhism which in this period began to become established in China. T'ao rejected both of these and through the development of Taoist philosophic ideas strove for harmony with physical Nature and an acceptance of the human condition. For my last illustration I have choosen what may have been the last work from T'ao hand, his funeral dirge for himself. This, though it has certain conventions of form, is simple in expression and does not require very much commentary for its understanding.

> The year is *ting-mao* (427) and the month that of the pitch-pipe *Wu-i* (the ninth month). The weather is cold and the nights are long. The wind's breath is mournful; the wild geese are on the move; plants and trees turn yellow and shed their leaves. Master T'ao is about to take leave of the Traveller's Inn, and at long last is to return to his original home. His friends are sad that they must mourn him, that they will join in his funeral procession this very evening, make offering of delicate foods and present libation of clear wine. The waiting faces already grow dark; the sounds he hears grow fainter. Alas! Alas!

> Vast is the Great Mass ![16]
> Remote is the high autumn Heaven !
> They gave birth to the Ten Thousand Things,[17]
> And I happened to become a man.
> Since I became a man,
> I have met with poverty of fortune.
> My baskets and gourds were often empty,
> I had only thin clothes for the winter.

[16] i.e., Earth.
[17] A numerical expression for the sum of creation.

Yet full of joy I drew water in the valley,
Singing a song, I bore firewood on my back.
Shady is my rustic gate,
It has served me night and morning.
Spring and autumn alternate,
There was always work in the garden.
Now I weeded, now I hoed.
So the crops flourished, so they were abundant.
I delighted myself with simple books,
I sang to my seven-string lute.
In winter I basked in the sun,
In summer I bathed in the spring.
In my exertions there was no excessive labours,
And my mind had constant leisure.
I rejoiced in my destiny and accepted my lot,
So to live out my " hundred years "[18]
These " hundred years "
Men indeed delight in them.
They dread their not being completed,
And covet the days and grudge the seasons,
That while alive, they may be prized by their age,
And when dead, they may also be thought of.
Alas ! I have walked alone,
I have always been different in this.
Since favour has not been a glory to me,
Mud surely could not blacken me.
Remaining firmly in my poor cottage,
I drank to the full and composed poems.
I understood my destiny, I knew my fate,
But who can be without ties of affection ?
Now I am thus to be transformed,
I can suffer it without complaint.
For life to pass through a " hundred years ",
The body desires comfort and quiet.
Since I in old age meet my end,
What more should I desire ?
Cold and heat pass away ;
Not to be is different from being.
My wife's relatives come in the morning,
My friends hurry in the evening.
" We shall bury him in the midst of the wilds,
To give peace to his soul.

[18] The conventional expression for a man's natural span.

Sombre is our journey,
Gloomy is the tomb door.
Extravagance makes us ashamed of the minister of Sung,
Frugality makes us laugh at Wang-sun.[19]
Silent, he has already perished,
Sad, he is already remote ".
They will not raise a mound or plant trees.
Days and months will pass away.
Without honour or praise before,
How afterwards should I be sung ?
Man's life is truly hard,
What will death be like ?
Alas ! Alas !

(*Works*, c. 7.)

I leave this other side of T'ao to be expressed by this one piece which, though very moving is perhaps not philosophically profound. To describe and assess T'ao's philosophic contribution would require a very considerable account of the thought currents of his times, which would be quite outside the scope and intention of this lecture which is only to bring forward one aspect of the poet and his work that has generally been obscured and, in my opinion, not fully appreciated. If I had to select a fault in native Chinese scholarship which I very much admire, it would be that of an overfondness for classification so that too precise and at the same time too incomplete a label may become attached to a man or to a work and, once attached, may act as a barrier to full understanding. But to compensate for this, Chinese poets can be very intimate and selfrevealing, and this also I hope that I may here have shown.

[19] The Minister of Sung is Huan T'ui who is particularly remembered for his attempt to kill Confucius, c. 492 B.C. The reference here is to the story of his spending more than three years in the making of a stone coffin. Yang Wang-sun (2nd Ct. B.C.) by contrast gave orders that he should be buried naked (v. *Han-shu* 67).