Book Review

Charles Yim-tze Kwong: *Tao Qian and the Chinese Poetic Tradition: The Quest for Cultural Identity* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1994)

Jesse Fleming

This study of the work, life and times of Tao Qian has as one of its main themes the idea that Tao, a farmer/poet/recluse, was innovative (for example, in not using parallelism and abstract/abstruse language as his contemporary Neo-Daoist poets often did), but was by no means a reformer seeking to change the way poets write. Kwong states: "It is to Tao's credit as a nature poet that the 'patching traces' and 'chisel marks' of word-sculpturing common in his age—obscure vocabulary, jagged syntax, obtrusive allusions (especially philosophical jargon), mechanical parallelisms—are absent in his writings" (156). As Kwong convincingly portrays him, Tao Qian was a simple man living a simple life in direct contact with Nature, and this simplicity and naturalness of the man is reflected in his poetry. For example Kwong writes, "what Tao imparts is a sense of the Way residing in the daily rhythms of existence" (142) and "the movement of the poem is the rhythm of Nature and the course of the poet's life" (193).

Tao is further portrayed as a poet whose life and literary works are compatible with both the spirit of Daoism and Confucianism. Thus, we see in his life and poetry a humanistic poet who feels the pull toward serving as an official, and yet also feels a need to live as a genuine recluse in close touch with Nature. Kwong states: "In fact, Tao's work clearly shows Daoist Naturalism and the Confucian moral Way fused into a total outlook and vision . . ."(43). As a Nature poet, Tao Qian seems especially close to Zhuangzi, for example in his apparent ability to "forget words," forget himself and others. On the

other hand, Kwong emphasizes several times that, "he [Tao Qian] fills in what Zhuangzi has left unfinished by showing how Dao resides in the ordinary" (112); according to Kwong, this is because "an absolute follower of Zhuangzi should be independent of circumstances" (19). One has to wonder if Kwong is correct, considering that Zhuangzi does have many anecdotes about recluses similar to Tao himself. Kwong recognizes that "The mystical proportions of the true man are absent in Tao's writings . . ."(23). Regarding Zhuangzi, Kwong also makes the interesting point that the concept-word *zhen* (usually translated "true" or "genuine," as in the compound word *zhen-jen*, "true man"), which he translates as "truthfulness" (41) is not found anywhere in the Confucian canon, and only appears in Daoist works. At one point Kwong's wording and syntax are a bit confusing and seem to contradict what he says at the bottom of the same page: he first states that "it may be noted that contrary to popular beliefs and practices among the Jin literati, body, shadow, and spirit all reject the possibility of physical immortality, a notion that runs counter to Daoist thinking" (64). Then, on the same page he says, "In short, the issue of physical immortality does not arise in Daoist thought because immortality only exists in the sense of being one with the eternal Dao." At best Kwong misrepresents what he means to say in the first quote due to tortured syntax, or at worst he simply contradicts himself. It is likely that the former is the case since he also correctly remarks on the same page that, "Zhuangzi maintains the dialectic unity of life and death in the cosmic flux . . ." and gives a similarly accurate interpretation of Laozi's philosophy of death. As for the Confucian element in Qian's personal character and in his poetry, Qian argues that Tao was a poet who gained inspiration through perspiration in his daily farm work, whereas "what Confucius inadvertently did was to stigmatize livelihood as a vulgar matter which became a literary taboo . . ."(197).

Kwong not only believes "the key to the poet's art lies in his life" (198), but apparently also accepts the historicist position that one can only understand works of literature by seeing them in their historical context; he states: "there can be no rigid distinction between

what lies within and outside a text" (3). Hence, one of the most interesting aspects of his book (at least to this reviewer) is his comparison of Tao Qian with Tao's Neo-Daoist contemporaries, in particular the famous "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove," such as the amusing eccentric Ruan Ji, Xi Kang, and Cao Cao, the infamously cruel character described in the *Shishuo xinyu*. Regarding the well-known practice of "pure conversation" (*qingtan*), Kwong makes the sound observation that this had its roots in the pithy sayings of Zhuangzi, and was later carried on in the *gongan* tradition of Zen, and although Tao's poetry is similarly simple, it does not indulge in the metaphysical speculation typical of *xuanxue* metaphysics.

Perhaps of particular interest to readers of this journal of comparative literature, are Kwong's comparisons of Tao's poetry with Western poets and literary theories. For example, there is a brief comparison of Tao and Western notions of allegory (97-8), French symbolism (101-2), "pastoral" poetry (ch. 7), and Tennyson, Blake, and Cowper (pp. 190-1) on the "mystical" oneness and harmony of all things. One looks for (and finds) some brief comparison of Tao and Wordsworth (164) as poets who drew inspiration from Nature and believed in using the colloquial language of the common man, but one also looks for (and does not find) a very thorough comparison of Tao and fellow farmer/poet Robert Frost (122, 133). Also, some mention of the very valuable work of other scholars such as James J. Y. Liu might have been helpful in his exposition of Tao's poetics. Similarly, considering the rather frequent image of the "lonely boat" in Tao's poetry, one expects some passing mention of the important paper on this topic in Chinese poetry by Eugene Eoyang (who is cited in the Selected Bibliography, as James J. Y. Liu is, but is not actually discussed in the text at all).

Another topic frequently broached (114, 124) but not dealt with in a systematic way, is the concept of "interfusion of feeling and scene" (*qingjing jiaorong*). Kwong sketchily discusses (188, 191-2) "the formal absence of the 'I'" in connection with the concept of *qingjing jiaorong*, and Wang Guowei's very important theory of egoless (*wu wo*—"no self") poetry, but one would have liked a more

thorough discussion. By the way, the translations of Tao's poems are generally accurate and melifluous, but in this reviewer's opinion (especially in light of the issue of "no self" and interfusion of self and scene), it might have been preferable when possible to stick close to the original Chinese which does not use the word "I" (*wo*), instead of inserting it obtrusively and gratuitously into the English translation, as is often the case in Kwong's translations. Just one example: the Chinese in one of Tao's poems is, *jung dou nan shan xia*, rendered by Kwong into English as, "I planted seeds below the southern hill," but why not "Having planted seeds below the southern hill," or something similar, without the "I"? Kwong's own theoretical discussions of "interfusion of self and scene" would seem to call for such literal translation. His translation of the concept-word *de* (important throughout Chinese philosophy, and often translated "virtue" or "power") as "a man's spirit" (119) is also questionable.

One of the minor points Kwong makes, which this reviewer appreciates, is his repeated reference (119) to philosophy and poetry as "sister arts" and to a "symbiotic unity between art and philosophy" (190), a "marriage between philosophy and art" (131), a "wedding poetry to philosophy in a way that enhances the vitality of both" (122). Of course, Kwong tries to make clear that while there is a strong affinity between philosophy and poetry, and Tao Qian's poetry has a philosophical dimension, it is far from the *xuanyan shi* (metaphysical poetry) fashionable in his times. Regarding philosophy, one disconcerting thing about Kwong's book is his very frequent use of the word "existential" (103, 105, 119, 125, 136, 165, 179, 184, 185, 186, 187, 192, 195, 199, 207, etc.), in phrases such as "existential choice," "existential praxis," "existential stance," "existential meanings," "existential norms," "existential quest," "existential poetics," "existential signposts," etc. Kwong sometimes uses "existential" in contrast with "cosmic" (187, 192, 195), and I think he means to emphasize that Tao Qian was a very "earthy" poet, rather than a metaphysician lost in abstract speculations, but nevertheless one ends by wondering if perhaps Tao Qian was not the great-grandfather of existentialism.

Another somewhat disappointing thing about an otherwise fine

book, is chapter 10, "Luminosity of the Unconscious: The Ineffable Truth," which by its title promises to explain the role of the "unconscious" in Tao's life and/or work. However, the concept-word "unconscious" is little discussed in this chapter, perhaps because it is "ineffable." It is by the way mentioned at least twice elsewhere, as when Kwong refers to "unconscious intentions and impulses" (2), and when he quotes Goethe as holding that, "everything which the genius does as genius, eventuates unconsciously" (103).

In conclusion, this book is an interesting and intellectual introduction to Tao Qian and his poetry. It is written in good English (with minor exceptions, as on pp. 53, 155, 177). It is punctuated with eloquent insights, for example: "it may even be that the Chinese love for parallelism reflects a cultural instinct traceable to a bipolar cosmological vision wherein the world's myriad phenomena are endowed with balancing attributes" (154). Happily, it is also not marred by the all too common "post-modernist" jargon, but it does indulge in some esoteric vocabulary such as "euhemeric" and "polyhedral" which obfuscates more than it clarifies. There are also a few purple passages of rhetoric, such as: "The poem [Tao's 'Trees in Bloom'] is even more dynamic than Cao's [Cao Cao's] partly because of its interjectional note, which lifts its tempo and raises its intensity and so accentuates the force imparted by the lyric form" (26). The Glossary of Chinese characters is helpful, but the index does not even mention the word "existential," and while the endnotes gathered together at the end of the book are helpful and in good order, it would have been a bit more useful to the inquiring reader if each page in the endnote section had been marked at the top with the chapter number, to aid in quickly finding sought after endnotes.