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The Great Poet Tao Yuanming's Health Maintenance Habit and His Literature Creation in Ancient China

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1. Preface

Tao Yuanming (A.D.365–427), a great poet of Eastern Jin Dynasty (A.D.4–5) in China, was well known in the world. As early as the 8th century, Tao Yuanming's works were circulated in Japan and exerted great influence on the Japanese poets who wrote poems in the Chinese style. In 1898, the German Sinologist Frederick Folk published *Tao Yuanming: Peach-Blossom Spring*, the first German book on Tao Yuanming. In 1930, the famous Chinese poet Liang Zongdai published a French translation of Tao Yuanming's Poems in Paris, which was highly praised by Roman Roland. *Tao Yuanming's Poems* were first translated into English in the beginning of the 20th century. *170 Chinese poems* translated by Arthur Waley and

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published in 1918 contains 12 poems by Tao Yuanming. In *Encyclopedia Britannic* there is an entry for a detailed introduction to Tao Yuanming, who is called the “the originator of Chinese pastoral poetry”.¹⁾ Some famous works such as *Homeward Ho!*, *Drinking Wine*, *Peach-Blossom Spring*, *Back to My Former House* and *Tao Yuan-ming: A Biographical Sketch*, were given more attention by Burton Watson, R.H. Kotewall et al. Cyril Birch, Arthur Waley, Amy Lowell, Charles Budd, Kenneth Rezroth, Stephen Owen, J.D. Frodsham, Pauline Yu, William Acker, Andrew Boyd, David Lattimore, A.R. Davis, etc. In this paper, I have researched Tao Yuanming’s drug addiction and health maintenance.

2. The Custom of Drug Taking for Health Maintenance and the Poet Tao Yuanming

Famous scholar Mr. Wang Yao, a professor in Peking University, first researched the drug addiction and health maintenance of the great poet Tao Yuanming. Professor Wang said that Tao Yuanming collected chrysanthemum flower to take as alongevity drug, not for appreciation only.²⁾ The ancient Chinese prolonged their life by

1) Wang Rongpei & Xiong Zhiqi, *The Complete Works of Tao Yuanming*, Hunan People’s Publishing House & Foreign Language Teaching Research Press, 2003, 49–50.

2) Wang Yao, *Tao Yuanming, Compilation of Chinese Literature*, Ping Ming Press, 1953, 84–86.

taking wonder drugs and intended to live forever by appealing for supernatural being. The time custom and ideas influenced Tao Yuanming deeply.

In the early Western Zhou Dynasty (B.D.11–8), the custom of drinking wine to preserve health began to prevail with emperors, the nobility and their family members. The custom of taking wonder drugs instead of drinking wine began in the Eastern Han Dynasty, not in He Yan in Wei Dynasty like most people believe. In fact, Early in the Eastern Han Dynasty, the ideologist Wang Chong in his famous work *Lun Heng* spoke of preserving his health and prolonging his life by taking wonder drugs like his contemporaries. Wang Chong even said that he drank wine and took wonder drugs every day in order to live longer when he was about seventy years that old which was longer than most people in ancient China lived. But Wang Chong still worried about this longevity and wished for eternal life.

At that time, people also paid attention to the wine and drug vessels. One ancient book of that time told a story about someone that took a kind of elixir and became supernatural successfully. After feeding his pets the elixir and painting the house with it, he, his pets and house went to heaven together. We can see the adoration and craziness of taking wonder medicine.

Especially in the Wei Dynasty, He Yan had succeeded to preserve his health by taking wonder drugs, which stimulated many people to follow, including the emperors, officers, scholars, gentlemen and even anchorit living deep in the country.

The custom seemed to prevail in the Tao family too. Tao Dan, one of Tao Yuanming's uncles, who was crazed in preserving his health and prolonging his life. Influenced by the custom and his family, Tao Yuanming also fell over himself for health maintenance which can be reflected in his works. His philosophy poems *The Flesh, the Shadow and the Spirit* say, "The heaven lasts forever with the earth while hills and rivers never change their worth. The plant have always followed Nature's course, with frost and dew as their empowering source. Of all things, man is listed at the top. But he cannot revive as the crop." It also say, "The three great emperors are of great mind, but have they left a single trace behind? In endless pursuit for eternal life, Peng Zu died and gave up worldly strife. Old or young, no one escapes from death. Wise or foolish, man'll draw his last breath." In his famous poem *Back to Country Life*, Tao Yuanming said, "The human life is like a magic show; To nothingness it will eventually go." In the poem *A leisured Life on Double Ninth*, Tao Yuanming said, "man's life is short and full of cares and strife, yet man still yearns to live a long, long life". In his classical poems *Drinking Wine*, such ideas were shown and expressed frequently. He said, "The things may live and die, rise and fall, this everlasting law applies to all", "Valuing fame for years and years in life, what can he hope to gain in worldly strife", "No matter how he takes care of his health, when he dies, gone is all his wealth." and "The natural world in infinite and vast, while human life is brief and soon is passed. As time and tide flow on without delay,

before I'm old, my hair has long turned grey.” With anxiety, Tao Yuanming sought a way to extricate himself from natural death and pursued eternal life.

According to the limited literature, we know that Tao Yuanming's main means of pursuit for eternal life was to drink chrysanthemum wine. In the poems *Drinking Wine*, he said, “Whenever I get some good wine, I take a sip every evening. In my drunkenness, I often write a few lines of verse to amuse myself.” Even after drinking, he could write poems. He was moderate in drinking, and he did not completely give up the pursuit for eternal life. Tao Yuanming was fond of drinking chrysanthemum wine which can be seen from his poem *Drinking Wine*, “I plunk hedge-side chrysanthemum with pleasure.” After leaving his official position and returning to country life, Tao Yuanming was glad that the pine trees and chrysanthemums were still alive. He acclaimed, “We drink the fresh wine to our hearts? Content.” At the end of his life, he still said, “However, my sole regret will still survive, that I didn't drink enough wine when alive”. He felt deeply nostalgic about his chrysanthemums wine and expressed great regret for drinking so little that he passed away early.

As the scholar Huang Zhonglun from Taiwan said, there were two things Tao Yuanming was fond of his whole life: one was the chrysanthemum flower, the other was wine drinking.³⁾ This is true. In his famous poem *A leisured Life on Double Ninth*, Tao Yuanming

3) Huang Zhonglun, *Research on the Complete Works of Tao Yuanming*, PamirPress, 1965, 13.

said, “Now that I am living a leisured life, I love the name of Double Ninth. When autumn chrysanthemums flourish in my garden, I have no wine to drink. In face of flowers, I write this verse to vent my feelings: Man’s life is short and full of cares and strife, yet man still yearns to live a long, long life.” and “The wine relieves me of many a care, chrysanthemums give me years to space.” Here, he explained why he liked drinking chrysanthemum wine. Double Ninth Festival is a special and auspicious day for people pursuing for eternal life in China.

3. Beautiful Appearance, Drug Addiction and Tao Yuanming’s Literature Creation

The desire to look attractive is universal and people living in Wei and Jin Dynasties (A.D.3–5) were fastidious about their appearance. In the beginning, people had wonder drugs or drank chrysanthemum wine, and they found that their appearance became more beautiful shortly afterwards. The celebrated scholars He Yan and Ji Kang were the typical representatives of this custom. And Tao Yuanming’s attitude towards wine drinking and drug addiction was like that of Ji Kang. He took them for eternal life not for fun. In his poem *The Spirit View*, he said, “When you get drunk, you may forget your woe, however, fatal outcome is sure and slow.” And in the poem *Abstaining from Wine*, he said, “I shall abstain from wine as my

demand, until I reach the real immortal land. Could I look younger than it now appears, I'd keep from drinking for a thousand years.” In his old age Tao Yuanming controlled the wine drinking to preserve his health and prolong his life.

In the *Miscellaneous Poems* he said, “A pine stands on the cliff, so slender, so slender, stands there like a boy, so tender, so tender. As a younger fifteen years of age, how can it grow taller than the average? Full of energy and full of vigour, it'll surly grow into a mighty figure.” When he was only fifteen, Tao Yuanming paid attention to the ways of maintaining his health and appearance and began to protect his blood and body fluid and cultivate Qi. Lao-tzu, a Chinese renowned philosopher in the Spring and Autumn Period who said that if people could control their energy and vigor they would always be like infants. That was followed by Tao Yuanming. In the series of poems *Reading The Books of Mountain and Seas*, which is about mythology in ancient China, Tao Yuanming said, “In terrace on Jade Hill with clouds abreast, lives beautiful Queen Mother of West (a fairy godmother of mythology in ancient China), she is as old as the heaven and earth, millenniums have passed ever since her birth”. The Western (Fairy) Queen Mother was described in detail by Chuangtse, a noted philosopher, who died about 275 B.C. In his works, the wise man said, “For Tao ... it is based in itself, rooted in itself. Before heaven and earth were, Tao existed by itself from all time. It gave the spirit and rulers their spiritual powers, and gave Heaven and Earth their birth. To Tao, the zenith is not high, nor the

nadir low; no point in time is long ago, nor by the lapse of ages has it grown old... The Western (Fairy) Queen Mother obtained it, and settled at Shao Kuang, since when and until when, no one knows.”⁴⁾ Tao Yuanming’s pursuit for eternal life is like the Western (Fairy) Queen Mother. And in his poems, he said, “Where in the world grows the scarlet tree? Its yellow blooms and crimson fruits, can server as food and strengthen your life roots”. And he emphasized, “In this world I have but few real needs: Longevity and wine are what I heed”. However, he said, “as Death awaits all men alike at door, everybody will one day be no more; In the realm of Deathless Land, man has ten thousand years at his command, the Crimson Spring (fairy of mythology in ancient China) provides the drink for me, while food is grown on that Eternal Tree; When I tour with the stars, the sun, the moon, how can humanlife be spent so soon?” It is through the mythology that the poet expressed his wish for immortality. *In imitation of Old Poems* he said, “There lives a wretched hermit in the east, whose ragged coats are often torn and pieced. In thirty days he eats nine meals on mat, in ten long years he wears the same old hat. He takes the greatest pains in human face, and yet he always keeps a cheerful face.” The hermit always kept a cheerful face in the poem. In fact, the hermit was the poet himself, and it was a self-portrait of him.

Tao Yuanming worried that his beautiful appearance would fade

4) The works translation into English referred to Lin Yutang, *Chinese Mysticism, The Wisdom of ChinaandIndia*, Randon House New York, 1942, 659–660.

as he aged. In his poem *Admonishing My Sons* he said, “My hair at both my temples have turned grey, my skin and muscles weaken day by day.” In fact, at that time, he was only forty years old. In the poem *Harvest in Lowland Field in Mid-August* he showed, “I have passed my prime and grown old now”, he was only fifty. In his *Miscellaneous Poems*, he said, “Our youth, once gone, will not come back again, for the selfsame dawn we wait in vain.” and said, “As my potent strength falls into decay, my solid vigor fails me day and day.” and also said, “As I grow older with declining health, my raven hair has long turned grey by stealth. With whitish signs of age upon my head, I know that dimming future lies ahead.” In his poems *Drinking Wine*, he said, “As time and tide flow on without delay, before I’m old, my hair has long turned grey.” And in *Matching a Poem by Counsellor Zhang on New Year’s Eve*, he said wistfully, “As I grow old, my face has lost its ray; meanwhile my hair becomes a mass of grey.” From his hair and face and other appearance. Tao Yuanming felt the rest of his life shorter and shorter day by day.

From Tao Yuanming’s works and historical literature, we can learn about his appearance in the abstract description, not in concrete details. For example, in the poem *A Biography of the Five-Willow Gentleman*, he said, “He is reticent and keeps himself away from wealth and distinction. ... He is addicted to drinking ... He will drink to the last drop in their homes and get drunk at last. ... to be dressed in ragged clothes and to see the empty baskets and gourds.” And about his appearance in the historical documents *A Biographical*

Sketch Tao Yuanming, Hsiao Tung said, “And if he could get drunk first, he would not hesitate to address his partner in these terms: ‘I am drunk and will go to sleep; you may go.’ Such was the frankness of his manners. Another time when certain high officials paid him a visit, they found him busily brewing the wine. For straining off the dregs he was seen to take down off-hand his head-scarf for the purpose, and after straining, the wet scarf was immediately restored to his head with perfect unconcern.”⁵⁾ It is based on these descriptions in the literature that the artists of later ages draw their ideal portraits of Tao Yuanming.

The famous *painting Picture of Homeward Ho* by Li Gonglin, a painter in Ming Dynasty, was kept in the Taipei Palace Museum. In the picture, Tao Yuanming is mild, facing to left with long whiskers and his belt floating in the air, which seems that he is aloof from the worldly utilitarianism. Among all the portraits of Tao Yuanming, the most famous one is named *Yuanming’s Leisure and Carefree Mood*, drawn by Zhou Wei, an artist in Ming Dynasty. Mr. Yuan Xingpei, a professor in Peking University, spoke highly of the picture and said, “the figure is very vivid, and the picture is a great piece in the ancient Chinese figure paintings.”⁶⁾

5) Hsiao Tung (A.D.527): *A Biographical Sketch Tao Yuanming*.

6) Yuan Xingpei: *Tao Yuanming in Ancient Portraits*, Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Science) Nov. 2006, 12.

4. Tao Yuanming's Foot Disease and His Drug Addiction Habit

Tao Yuanming suffered from the foot disease in his old age and he could not walk without the help of his servants or sons. According to *A Biographical Sketch: Tao Yuanming* written by Hsiao Tung (A.D. 527), “the poet once went up Mount Lu ... He was accompanied by his disciple and two sons, who were carried luggage for him for the ailment in his feet.” The foot disease of Tao Yuanming was closely related to his drug addiction.

Scholar Lu Hsun (1881–1936) pointed out that the wonder drugs people took in Wei and Jin Dynasties were not a common medicine, but a poison called Wushi Powder. It is composed of five minerals: stalactite, stone calamine, crystobalite, halloysitum, rubrum, etc. At the initial stage after taking the drug, there were no symptoms. As time passed, people who took the drug would feel hot and dry and had to walk on and on to get rid of the heat. Therefore, a lot of time and money had to be invested. For the rich, it was leisure; for the poor, it was a disaster.

The pioneers of taking Wushi Powder were He Yan and Xiahou Xuan, two famous gentlemen in Wei Dynasty, who died young in political rivalries. Most people at that time only saw their beautiful appearance through taking drugs, but ignored the poisonous properties. According to the historical literature of Jin Dynasty, Emperor Ai sought eternal life and took many of the wonder drugs.

He was heavily poisoned and could not attend to state affairs. In contrast, the foot disease was only a result of taking little of the drug.

According to the documents in Jin and Song Dynasties, the foot disease seemed to be common at that time, as the contemporaries took many of the drugs. Some officials and scholars resigned with the excuse of such disease and were not been punished.

5. Conclusion

It was common to see people contract the foot disease in Jin and Song Dynasties, according to the literature, which was a distinctive feature of the society. Usually, people who suffered from the foot disease had the habit of taking wonder drugs and drinking wine to preserve their appearance. Therefore, it is probable that the foot disease was caused by the habit. This was also the case of Tao Yuanming's foot disease. The drug addiction and health maintenance of Tao Yuanming were closely related to the traditions and culture of his time, and the close relationship with Tao Yuanming's literature creation.

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Abstract

The Great Poet Tao Yuanming's Health Maintenance Habit and His Literature Creation in Ancient China

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Tao Yuanming (A.D.365–427), a great poet of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (A.D.4–5) in ancient China, was well known in the world. In this paper, I have researched Tao Yuanming's drug addiction, health maintenance and his literature creation. Influenced by the custom of the time and his family, he fell over himself for health maintenance period. He was crazed in pursuit for eternal life, and drank chrysanthemum wine and took wonder drugs, which were not a common medicine but a poison called Wushi Powder. When he was only fifteen, Tao Yuanming started paying attention to the ways of maintaining his health and appearance. The artists of later ages draw their ideal portraits of Tao Yuanming, such as the famous painting *Picture of Homeward Ho* by Li Gonglin, a famous painter in Ming Dynasty, which was kept in the Taipei Palace Museum.

Keywords: Tao Yuanming, Poet in Ancient China, health maintenance habit, literature creation