



1987

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Tau Yuan-ming

Tau Yuan-ming (365–427 A.D.) became a Chinese bureaucrat after a life of poverty, but he lasted only eighty-one days before tiring of his duties. He returned home to farm, tend chrysanthemums, drink, and write poetry. He wrote a story of a utopian society that lived beyond a spring in a peach grove. Less well known than the story is his “Poem of the Peach Spring.”

The society that Tau Yuan-ming described lived in harmony yet violated basic tenets of Confucianism, which encouraged devotion to authority and to the state. Tau Yuan-ming responded more to Taoism, which often opposed the social stability and conformity of Confucianism. “Poem of the Peach Spring” condemns those frantic individuals who cannot accept patterns of nature—who seek self-improvement over the appreciation and enjoyment of the natural world.

“Poem of the Peach Spring” is composed in five-character lines, employing parallelism between couplets. This poem is typical of Chinese poetry in that allusion makes the poem very condensed. Some of Tau Yuan-ming’s allusions are to works as distant from his day as his is from ours.

The First Emperor referred to in “Poem of the Peach Spring,” Shih Hwang Ti (259–210 B.C.), is well known for his attempt to wipe out all previous history through burning books, scholars, and peasants. He is the scale in Chinese history against which tyranny can be measured: Mao Tse-tung once boasted he had destroyed more books and scholars than even the First Emperor.