An Early Medieval Chinese Poem on Leaving Office and Retiring to the Countryside

David R. Knechtges

In this article I shall present an early medieval Chinese poem in which the author writes about leaving office to take up residence in the countryside. This poem is “Let Me Return” by Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365–427), also known as Tao Qian 陶潛, who is often considered the foremost Chinese poet before the Tang dynasty. This is a poet that Albert Hoffstädt may remember. In 2008, when I submitted a proposal to him about publishing a reference guide on early medieval Chinese literature, I presented about a dozen sample entries written by me and my wife Chang Taiping. I also included a translation of a long entry about Tao Yuanming by Professor Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈 of Peking University.¹ In my view Professor Yuan is the foremost authority on Tao Yuanming of his generation. His critical edition of Tao Yuanming’s works is unsurpassed in its critical acumen and literary insights.² He also has written a long monograph on Tao’s life, thought, and writings.³ The one entry Albert singled out for special praise was Yuan Xingpei’s entry on Tao Yuanming. Albert initially thought the entry had been written by a European or American scholar. He was quite surprised when I informed him that this entry was written by a distinguished Chinese scholar, and I had translated it from the Chinese. Several years later, Albert was visiting Beijing. My wife and I hosted a dinner for Albert where he was able to meet Professor Yuan in person. In this article, I shall make a number of references to Professor Yuan’s works.

The details of Tao’s life are too numerous to recount here. To make things simple, I shall mention the following pieces of essential information about him: Tao Yuanming came to maturity during the final years of the Eastern Jin (late fourth century). Although he usually is celebrated as a great hermit poet (his biography in the standard histories is actually in the chapter on recluses), for the first forty years of his life he held various official positions, mostly in his

1 For the published version, see David R. Knechtges and Taiping Chang, eds., *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature: A Reference Guide, Part Two* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1090–1112.

2 *Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu* 陶淵明集箋注, ed. Yuan Xingpei (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003).

3 Yuan Xingpei, *Tao Yuanming yanjiu* 陶淵明研究 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1997).

home commandery of Xunyang 潯陽 (modern Jiujiang 九江, Jiangxi). His natal place is Chaisang 柴桑 (southwest of modern Jiujiang city, Jiangxi). Although he speaks repeatedly of his distaste for official service, Tao accepted positions with several of the warlord generals who held sway in the Xunyang area during this time. Tao's final post was magistrate of Pengze 彭澤, a small county located in what is now modern northern Jiangxi on the south bank of the Yangtze River not far from modern Anhui. It was only about thirty miles from his home in Chaisang. This was in the autumn of 405. After eighty days in office, he decided to resign and retire for good. He returned to his home in the country, where he supported himself by farming and probably also by donations from friends.

While in retirement, Tao wrote a goodly amount of poetry that is usually characterized as *tian yuan* 田園 or "field and garden" verse. Among his best-known poems are the five-poem set "Gui yuan tian ju" 歸園田居 (Returning to garden and fields to dwell) and the "Guiqu lai ci" 歸去來辭 (Let me return!), both of which celebrate the delights of living in a rural area.⁴ The latter piece, which is the subject of this article, is one of the most frequently translated pieces of pre-Tang poetry. I translate the title as "Let Me Return!" As Professor Yang Lien-sheng pointed out in the 1950s, the second word in the title *lai* 來 has a hortatory force.⁵ Most translators render the title simply "The Return." More precisely, the title means "Let Me Return!"

Tao Yuanming provides a short preface to "Let Me Return!" in which he explains the circumstances of his decision to quit office.

Let Me Return!

My family was poor, and ploughing and planting were not sufficient to supply my needs. Young children filled the house, but in the jar, there was no store of grain. To obtain what I needed to sustain them, the means were not apparent to me. My kinsmen and friends often urged me to become a senior subaltern. Feeling a sense of relief, I thought of doing so, but I did not have the means to seek one. It happened that there were various incidents throughout the realm,⁶ and the regional officials considered the benevolent care for the people a virtue. A paternal uncle,

4 I have mainly relied on the text in *Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu*, 460–77. I have occasionally referred to the text in the sixth-century anthology *Wen xuan* 文選 (Selections of refined literature). See *Wen xuan* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), 45.2026–28.

5 See James Robert Hightower, "The *Fu* of T'ao Ch'ien," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 17 (1954): 220, n. 299a.

6 Tao Qian refers here to the numerous uprisings and civil wars that erupted at the end of the Eastern Jin dynasty.

because of my impoverished state subsequently informed [someone], and I became employed in a minor county. At that time the storm had not abated,⁷ and I was wary of serving in a distant post. Pengze was one hundred leagues from my home, but the yield from the government fields was sufficient to make wine.⁸ Thus, I then requested the post. By the time I had been in the position a few days, with deep longing I had the desire to return home. Why was this? My basic nature is that of spontaneity, and it is nothing that can be forced or tempered. Although hunger and cold are acute, going against my principles causes me distress. In the past when I engaged in human affairs, it was always because I put myself at the service of my mouth and stomach. Thus, I was chagrined and indignant, deeply ashamed that I had violated my long-held ideals. I still expected to remain another year, and then straighten my clothes and slip away in the night. But soon thereafter, my younger sister Madame Cheng passed away in Wuchang. My feeling at the time was to go there as quickly as possible, and thus of my own volition I resigned office and left. From mid-autumn to winter, I had been in office eighty-odd days. Given that this circumstance suited my wishes,⁹ I have written a piece titled “Let Me Return!” The eleventh month of the year *yisi* [December 405].

余家貧，耕植不足以自給，幼稚盈室，餽無儲粟。生生所資，未見其術。親故多勸余爲長吏，脫然有懷，求之靡途。會有四方之事，諸侯以惠愛爲德，家叔以余貧苦，遂見用爲小邑。于時風波未靜，心憚遠役，彭澤去家百里，公田之利，足以爲酒，故便求之。及少日，眷然有歸歟之情。何則？質性自然，非矯勵所得。飢凍雖切，違己交病。嘗從人事，皆口腹自役。於是悵然慷慨，深愧平生之志。猶望一稔，當歛裳宵逝。尋程氏妹喪于武昌，情在駿奔，自免去職。仲秋至冬，在官八十餘日。因事順心，命篇曰歸去來兮。乙巳歲十一月也。

In the preface, Tao first mentions that he was poor and unable to support his growing family by farming the land. He had some influential relatives who

7 According to Yuan Xingpei (*Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu* 5.468, n. 8), the “storm” (literally “wind and waves”) refers to the usurpation of the Jin throne by Huan Xuan 桓玄 (369–404) in 403 and the military expedition led by Liu Yu 劉裕 against him.

8 Yuan Xingpei (*Tao Yuanming jianzhu*, 5.469, n. 11) notes a variant reading for this line, which he prefers: “The grain from the public fields was more than ample and was an enrichment [over my previous impoverished condition]” 公田之秬過足爲潤. He explains that Tao would have been entitled to receive grain from the public lands as well as his salary.

9 The “circumstance” is the death of his younger sister.

urged him to take up an official position. Through the good offices of a paternal uncle, he was able to get a job as magistrate of Pengze. However, Tao confesses that almost as soon as he arrived at his post, he was eager to resign and return home. His rationale? To serve in this office or any office was contrary to his basic nature, which is that of *ziran*. This word has various meanings, notably in this context “spontaneity” and “naturalness.” In “Returning to the Farm to Dwell” #1, the last four lines read:

戶庭無塵雜，	Within my doors and courtyard there is no dusty confusion;
虛室有餘閑。	In the empty rooms I have excess leisure.
久在樊籠裏，	Long was I in a confining cage,
復得反自然。	But once again I am able to return to naturalness. ¹⁰

As Richard Mather aptly put it, those in the early medieval period such as Tao Yuanming who upheld “spontaneity” and “naturalness” were “quietists, who preferred compliance with one’s own nature rather than with any artificial code.” In practical terms this usually meant non-conformity with the rites and retirement from public life.

It should be noted that Tao’s account in the preface differs from the official biographies of Tao Yuanming that were written later. The earliest one is from the *Song shu* 宋書 (History of the Song), written about sixty years after Tao’s death:

His mother being old and his family poor, he was invited to serve as regional administrative aide, but being unable to bear the tedium of administration, within a few days, he resigned and returned home. The regional authorities summoned him to serve as recorder, but he did not take up the post. He supported himself by plowing the fields, and subsequently contracted a debilitating illness. He then became a military aide to the Zhenjun General and Jianwei General. He said to his relatives and friends, “For now I wish with zither and song to provide resources for my ‘three paths’.¹¹ Would this be possible?” When the authorities heard of

¹⁰ Tao Yuanming *ji jianzhu*, 2:76.

¹¹ The phrase “zither and song” refers to Tao’s appointment as magistrate of Pengze. It is an allusion to *Analec*s 17/4: “When the Master went to Wucheng [where Ziyu was serving as a local official], he heard the sounds of a zither and singing.” The “three paths” is a phrase used to designate the abode of a retired official. It alludes to Jiang Xu 蔣詡, who at the end of the Former Han refused to serve under the “usurper” Wang Mang (r. 9–25 CE). He resigned from office and retired to his country residence the grounds of which were overgrown with briars and thorns. Jiang had three paths cleared that admitted entry to

this, they appointed him magistrate of Pengze. In the government fields he ordered all his functionaries to plant glutinous millet [which was suitable for making wine].¹² His wife and children adamantly begged him to plant non-glutinous rice [which was not suitable for making wine]. Tao then had two *qing* and ten *mu* [30.25 acres] planted with glutinous millet, and fifty *mu* [6.05 acres] planted with non-glutinous rice. The commandery dispatched a local inspector [to Pengze]. Tao's functionaries informed him he should tie up his belt and receive him. Heaving a sigh, Tao said, "I cannot bend my waist to a petty fellow from a country hamlet for five pecks of grain." That very day he untied his seal ribbons and left his post.¹³ He composed "Let Me Return!"

親老家貧，起爲州祭酒，不堪吏職，少日，自解歸。州召主簿，不就。躬耕自資，遂抱羸疾，復爲鎮軍、建威參軍，謂親朋曰：「聊欲弦歌，以爲三逕之資，可乎？」執事者聞之，以爲彭澤令。公田悉令吏種秬稻，妻子固請種秠，乃使二頃五十畝種秬，五十畝種秠。郡遣督郵至，縣吏白應東帶見之，潛嘆曰：「我不能爲五斗米折腰向鄉里小人。」即日解印綬去職。賦《歸去來》。

The most significant difference between the preface and the *History of Song* version is the story of why Tao Yuanming resigned from office. In the preface Tao simply says after serving for only a few days, he was eager to return home mainly because it was against his basic nature to serve in this, or any position. The story of his refusing to meet the local Pengze official is much more famous. The phrase "I cannot bend my waist to a petty fellow from a country hamlet for five pecks of grain" has become proverbial. However, as Tian Xiaofei has put it, "this is the least credible part in the biographical account."¹⁴ I should also mention that the preface itself is problematic. In the earliest extant source to preserve "Let Me Return!," the sixth-century anthology *Wen xuan* (Selections

himself and two of his retired friends. The phrase "resources for my 'three paths'" means Tao wished to obtain a small salary to support himself in a minor post in the countryside.

12 Most scholars translate the grain mentioned here as glutinous rice. However, although the word *shu* 秬 is a general term for glutinous cereal, it technically designates a glutinous variety of *Seteria italica*. See Francesa Bray, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 6: *Biology and Biological Technology*, part 11: Agriculture (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), 440. On *Seteria* millet as a substrate for wine, see H. T. Huang, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 6: *Biology and Biological Technology*, part V: *Fermentation and Food Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 174, 178.

13 See *Song shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 53, 2287.

14 *Tao Yuanming and Manuscript Culture: The Record of a Dusty Table* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2005), 77.

of refined literature), the preface is much shorter than the versions preserved in Tao's collected works, the earliest extant edition of which dates from the twelfth century. All it says is the following: "My family was poor, but I was also wary of serving in a distant post. Pengze was one hundred leagues from my home, and thus I then requested the post. By the time I had been in the position a few days, with deep longing I had the desire to return home. Given that this circumstance suited my wishes, I have written a piece titled 'Let Me Return!'"

I should also note that the line in the preface that mentions Tao was interested in the Pengze position because he could make wine from the grain in the government fields has a significant variant that Professor Yuan Xingpei prefers. "The grain from the government fields was more than ample and was an enrichment [over his previous impoverished condition]." It says nothing about planting glutinous millet to make wine.

The poem itself can be divided into four sections based on changes in the rhyming. In the first section, LL. 1–12, Tao recounts how he decides to leave Pengze and return home.

- Let me return!
 My fields and gardens are about to be overgrown with weeds—
 2 why not return?
 Since I have made my heart the thrall of my body,
 4 Why be so downcast and dejected in solitary sorrow?
 I realize that what has passed cannot be corrected;
 6 But what is to come can be remedied.
 Truly I have not traveled far on the wrong path;
 8 I am aware today I am right and yesterday I was wrong.
 My boat rocks and sways as it lightly drifts;
 10 The wind, whirling and swirling, blows my gown.
 I inquire of a traveler about the road ahead;
 12 I begrudge the fading starlight at dawn.

歸去來兮，田園將蕪胡不歸！既自以心爲形役，奚惆悵而獨悲。悟已往之不諫，知來者之可追。實迷途其未遠，覺今是而昨非。舟遙遙以輕颺，風飄飄而吹衣。問征夫以前路，恨晨光之熹微。

Although Tao mentions that he is worried his fields and gardens may be overgrown with weeds, his main concern is that his decision to take up the position of magistrate simply to feed himself and his family may have been the wrong one. Lines 5–6 allude to *Analects* 18/5: "The madman of Chu, Jieyu, sang the

following song: ‘Phoenix, phoenix, / How your virtue has declined! / What has passed cannot be corrected; / What is to come can be remedied.’” However, Tao is optimistic that it is not too late to rectify matters. He ends this section by recounting his journey home.

In the second section, lines 13–32, Tao expresses delight at arriving home:

- I finally catch sight of “crossbeam and roof”:
 14 I am so joyful I break into a run.
 A servant welcomes me;
 16 My young son awaits me at the door.
 The three paths are almost covered with weeds;
 18 But pines and chrysanthemums still remain.
 Leading the children by the hand I enter the house,
 20 Where there is a goblet filled with wine.
 I lift up a jug and cup and pour for myself;
 22 A glance at the courtyard trees brings joy to my face.
 I lean on the southern window to convey my contempt for the world;
 24 For I know how a knee’s width space provides easy comfort.
 My daily passage through the garden creates a well-worn path;
 26 Although there is a gate, it is always closed.
 Propped up on a staff I stroll and rest;
 28 At times I raise my head and look into the distance.
 Clouds aimlessly emerge from the peaks;
 30 Birds, weary of flying, know to return home;
 The sun grows dim and is about to set;
 32 I stroke a solitary pine and pace around it.

乃瞻衡宇，載欣載奔。僮僕歡迎，稚子候門。三徑就荒，松菊猶存。
 攜幼入室，有酒盈樽。引壺觴以自酌，眄庭柯以怡顏。倚南窗以寄
 傲，審容膝之易安。園日涉以成趣，門雖設而常關。策扶老以流憩，
 時矯首而遐觀。

In line 13, “crossbeam and roof” is a conventional term for a humble abode. It is derived from a phrase in *Mao shi* 138/1: “Beneath a crossbeam door,/ One can linger long.” The *Mao* commentary explains that the door consists of a single crossbeam, thus indicating that the abode is simple and humble. In L. 15, Tao mentions he is greeted by a servant, or perhaps servants. I should mention that the word *tong* 童, which I have provisionally translated as “servant,” here can also mean bondservant or slave. In a long two-page note in his *Han Social Structure*, Ch’ü T’ung-tsu explains *tong* “was a synonym for slave.” He also notes

that *tong* “does not always refer to male slaves,” but can also include female slaves. Ch’ü further explains that although *tong* “may mean ‘youth,’ it is important to note that when it is used to mean ‘slave’ the age connotation is absent...”.¹⁵ Not many poor farmers had *tong* in this period. If Tao Yuanming owned *tong*, even though he did not have to pay them in wages, he would have had to have the resources to supply them with food, housing, clothing, and of course the tools that they used. According to Hsu Cho-yun, this “could amount to a sizable outlay of money.”¹⁶ Tao would also have had to pay a considerable sum to purchase a slave. In the Han period, the price of a slave “varied from 5,000 to 20,000 cash.”¹⁷ Thus, Tao may not have been as poor as he claims.

Tao Qian’s farm was not exactly small—it was about a dozen *mu* (about 1.5 acres). He had a house of eight or nine bays that was shaded by trees. There is evidence that Tao may have had more than one farm. He refers to several different fields including a western field that may have been tended by an overseer in his employ.¹⁸ In order to reach one of his fields located in a rugged mountain area he had to undertake a trip that required him to cross a lake and then follow a winding stream.¹⁹

This section contains images that are indelibly associated with Tao Yuanming. The pine and chrysanthemums are symbols of durability and longevity. A Tao Yuanming poem would be incomplete without a reference to his imbibing of wine. He wrote a set of twenty poems titled “Drinking Wine” which are classics in Chinese poetry on the theme of wine drinking. Other notable features in this section is the mention of the three paths overgrown with weeds and the closed gate. These are statements of how he has closed himself off from conventional society, especially the court. The last line in this section in which he strokes the pine tree as he paces around it is another example of his fondness for this arboreal image.

In section III, lines 33–48, Tao recounts how he wishes to spend his time in retirement:

Let me return!

- 34 May I end all contacts and sever all associations.
The world and I are at odds with one another;

15 Ch’ü T’ung-tsu, *Han Social Structure*, ed. Jack L. Dull (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1972), 336–37, n. 51.

16 Hsu Cho-yun, *Han Agriculture*, ed. Jack L. Dull (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1980), 64.

17 Ibid., 63, n. 13.

18 See *Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu*, 3.229, 3.233, n. 4.

19 See *ibid.*, 3.231, “Bingchen sui bayue zhong yu Xiasun tianshen hu” 丙辰歲八月中於下
澣田舍穫 (Eighth Month of the *Bingchen* Year, Harvest at the Farmhouse of Xiasun).

- 36 If I again were to harness my carriage, what would I seek?
 I enjoy convivial conversation with my family;
 38 I delight in zither and literature to dispel my cares.
 Farmers tell me that it is now spring;
 40 There will be work to done in the western fields.
 At times I send for a covered cart;
 42 At times I row a solitary boat.
 In dim and dark recesses, I explore ravines;
 44 Over rough and rugged paths, I cross the hills.
 The trees are flourishing and are about to bloom;
 46 The springs are trickling and just beginning to flow.
 I like that all things have attained their season;
 48 I am moved that my life is approaching its end!

歸去來兮，請息交以絕游。世與我而相遺，復駕言兮焉求？悅親戚之情話，樂琴書以消憂。農人告余以春及，將有事於西疇。或命巾車，或棹孤舟。既窈窕以尋壑，亦崎嶇而經丘。木欣欣以向榮，泉涓涓而始流。善萬物之得時，感吾生之行休！

Tao begins by declaring his intention to “end all contacts and sever all associations.” By this he does not mean he will avoid contact with all persons, only those who are still serving in office and the court. Thus, in the following lines he mentions engaging in conversation with family members and local farmers. He also derives pleasure from zither music and literature.

Tao also tells of his going out to inspect his fields. Line 41 in which he mentions calling for a covered cart is intriguing: “At times I send for a covered cart.” The phrase translated as “covered cart” originally was the name of an official position, the intendant of public carriages that had charge of royal conveyances. Tao must have known this earlier usage. I suspect that by using this phrase he may be casting himself in the role of the “lord” of his country domain who orders a carriage to convey him on his travels through his estate. Thus, again he may not have been as poor as he often portrays himself to be.

In the final section, lines 49–60, Tao observes that given the brevity of human life, one simply should follow one’s heart and basic inclinations. This is another statement of his upholding naturalness and spontaneity. He also tells us that he has no interest in obtaining wealth and honor, nor does he wish to become an immortal (line 54). He rather prefers “traveling alone.” The words he uses here—*gū wǎng* 孤往—may be the first occurrence of this phrase in Chinese poetry.

In the concluding lines of this section we see several motifs of Chinese eremitic poetry. In line 57, Tao mentions climbing the eastern embankment and

whistling: "I climb the eastern embankment and slowly release a whistle." This is a reference to an earlier non-conformist, Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263, who claimed to have plowed the fields south of what he calls the "eastern embankment." Ruan Ji was also a renowned whistler. Su Jui-lung has shown that whistling, which is sometimes compared to Western yodeling, was employed during this period by recluses as a means to indicate their "disdain and contempt for worldly affairs or to show an attitude of absolute freedom and unrestraint."²⁰ The Tang *Wen xuan* commentator Li Shan 李善 (*Wen xuan* 21.1008) cites the following anecdote about Ruan Ji from the *Weishi chunqiu* 魏氏春秋 (Annals of the house of Wei) of Sun Sheng 孫盛 (302–373): "When Ruan Ji was young he often traveled to Sumen Mountain. There was a recluse there whose name no one knew. Ji chatted with him about the Way of Inaction of high antiquity, and also discussed the principles of the Five Emperors and Three Kings. The Master of Sumen remained impassive and did not indicate he even noticed him. Ji then made a long whistle to him, its shrill tones loudly resonating. The Master of Sumen pleasantly smiled. When Ji had gone down the mountain, the Master of Sumen also whistled, its sounds like that of simurgh and phoenix." Tao Qian here portrays himself as an emulator of Ruan Ji, both as a farmer and a whistler.

In the final couplet, Tao reflects on the prospect of death, which does not perturb him, for he knows that death is part of the natural process of things: "For now, I shall follow changes of nature until my return is complete; I rejoice in Heaven's decree—what is there to doubt?" In line 59 "return" refers to death, which Zhuangzi claimed was a return to the natural state of things: "Life has that from which it sprouts, and death has that to which it returns."²¹ In line 60, the phrase "rejoice in Heaven's decree" alludes to the *Classic of Changes*, "Commentary on the Appended Phrases," A/4: "[The sage] rejoices in heaven and understands its decrees, and thus is not burdened by care." In other poems, Tao characterizes death as a final return. Thus, in this poem Tao sees return in two senses: his return to his country home and his return to what he refers to in an elegy that he wrote for himself as "the eternal return to my original abode" 永歸於本宅. According to Yuan Xingpei, the "original abode" is the earth, out of which one is both born and where one returns when one dies.²²

As I mentioned above, Tao Yuanming is considered one of the premier writers of "field and garden verse." A famous example is "Returning to the Fields and Garden to Dwell" #3:

20 See "Whistling and Its Magico-religious Tradition: A Comparative Perspective," *Lingnan Journal of Chinese Studies* 3 (1999): 31.

21 *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, ed. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (1844–1896) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 7B.712.

22 See "Elegy for Myself," in *Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu* 7.558, n. 4.

- 種豆南山下, I plant beans below the southern mountain;
 草盛豆苗稀。 Wild grass flourishes, but bean sprouts are few.
 晨興理荒穢, I rise at dawn to attend to the rank weeds;
 4 帶月荷鋤歸。 Bringing along the moon with me, I return carrying my hoe.
 道狹草木長, The path is narrow, plants are tall;
 夕露沾我衣。 Evening dew soaks my clothes.
 衣沾不足惜, That my clothes are soaked is of no concern;
 8 但使願無違。 Just let there be no violation of my hopes.²³

“Pastoral” has often been used to characterize poems like this one. Pastoral even as applied to Western literature is a problematic term. As one of my former teachers, Thomas G. Rosenmeyer (1920–2007), explains, “the terms bucolic, pastoral, eclogue, and others shift about so much that their usefulness as distinguishing labels has become questionable.”²⁴ Pastoral poetry proper of course has its origins in the literature of ancient Greece and Rome, a poetic tradition well known to Albert Hoffstädt. However, Albert perhaps would find missing from Tao Yuanming’s rustic “countryside” pieces herdsmen exchanging songs with each other, or even goats, sheep, and cows rambling across a field, let alone wolves, jackals, and bears. Tao Yuanming never wrote lines like the following excerpt from Theocritus, *Idyll* I:

“Farewell, you wolves, jackals and bears in your mountain caves. I, Daphnis the oxherd, shall no longer be found in your forests, no longer found in your groves and woods.”

“I am the famous Daphnis who herded his cows here, Daphnis who watered here his bulls and calves.”²⁵

The following lines from Horace’s *Epodes* 11, “Beatus ille,” that praise the delights of country living are closer to sentiments expressed by Tao Yuanming in the poems cited above:

Beatus ille qui procul negotiis,
 ut prisca gens mortalium,

²³ Ibid., 2.85.

²⁴ *The Green Cabinet: Theocritus and the European and Pastoral Lyric* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969), 8. I studied with Professor Rosenmeyer at the University of Washington in the 1960s before he left for U.C. Berkeley. What little I know about Greek and Roman literature I learned from him.

²⁵ Neil Hopkinson, ed. and trans., *Theocritus Moschus Bion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015), 31.

paterna rura bobus exercet suis,
 solutus omni faenore,
 neque excitatur classico miles truci,
 neque horret iratum mare,
 forumque vitat et superba civium
 potentiorum limina.

Fortunate the man who, free from cares,
 Like men of old still works
 his father's fields with his own oxen,
 encumbered by no debt.
 No solider he, aroused by bugle's blare,
 nor does he fear the angry sea.
 The Forum he avoids and lofty doors
 of powerful citizens.²⁶

However, as Professor Rosenmeyer astutely observes, the speaker of these words is “the usurer Alfius, about to choke off his debtors and invest in his capital anew.”²⁷ Rosenmeyer also argues that Horace is disqualified as a pastoral poet because “his *Stimmungslandschaft* usually has a villa at the center of it. His farm is part of the world of business and culture because it is part of a larger harmony. Country and city are separated and contrasted because they are known to be one.”²⁸ As I have noted above, Tao Yuanming intently distances himself from the culture of the court and officialdom.

A value that Greek and Roman pastoral shares with Tao Yuanming is the idea of *otium*, which Rosenmeyer explains as “vacation, freedom, escape from pressing business.”²⁹ Obtaining *otium* in the countryside is similar to what Tao Yuanming says in the line from “Returning to the Farm to Dwell” cited above: “In the empty rooms I have excess leisure.” The word translated as “leisure” is *xian* 閑, also written *xian* 閒, which has a variety of meanings: ‘relaxed’, ‘at ease’, ‘idle’, ‘quiet’, and ‘rest’. The phrase *xian ju* 閑居, literally ‘dwelling at ease,’ is a phrase Tao uses to refer to his retirement to the countryside. In “Matching a Poem by Assistant Magistrate Guo” 和郭主簿二首, Tao directly identifies his farm in the country as a place where he can pursue “leisure activities”:

26 David West, trans., *Horace: The Complete Odes and Epodes* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 4.

27 *The Green Cabinet*, 212.

28 *Ibid.*, 182.

29 *Ibid.*, 67–68.

息交遊閑業， Having ceased social intercourse, I indulge in leisure activities;
 臥起弄書琴。 During my waking hours I amuse myself with writing and
 zither.³⁰

In another line of “Returning to Garden and Fields to Dwell” Tao characterizes his retreat to the countryside as an escape from the “dusty net” of the vulgar world:

少無適俗韻， From youth I lacked the temperament to fit in with the vulgar
 world;
 性本愛丘山。 By nature, I was basically fond of hills and mountains.
 誤落塵網中， By mistake I fell into the dusty net,
 一去三十年。 And once gone, thirty years have passed.

In his “Xinchou sui qi yue fu jia huan Jiangling ye xing Tukou” 辛丑歲七月赴假江陵夜行塗口 (In the Seventh Month of the *Xinchou* Year, Passing through Tukou at Night, Returning to Jiangling from Leave of Absence) Tao writes: “For thirty years I dwelled at ease,/ And I was oblivious of dusty affairs” 閒居三十年，遂與塵事冥.³¹ According to Yuan Xingpei, the terms “dusty net” and “dusty affairs” do not refer solely to official service, but to the “marketplace,” that is the time in which Tao lived in towns and cities and engaged in mundane activities.³² This sounds very much like the “escape from pressing business” that Rosenmeyer claims was part of the ancient Western concept of *otium*.

Albert Hoffstädt is about to embark on his “escape from pressing business,” at least on a part-time basis. Although his academic training was in Western classical literature, he has shown a remarkable understanding of the classical Chinese literary tradition, and in his capacity as Asian Studies editor at Brill he has been a highly effective advocate on behalf of solid scholarly works on subjects that many presses would not even consider publishing. I wish Albert a most enjoyable semi-retirement. May he “dwell at ease” and enjoy “otium cum dignitate.”

30 *Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu*, 2.144.

31 *Ibid.*, 3.193

32 *Tao Yuanming yanjiu*, 326.