

# The Lonely Watcher--Analysis on the Implication of Yuanming Tao's Shi Yun

Yalong Wang

The College of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China

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**Abstract:** The poem Shi Yun (The Course of Nature) was written by Yuanming Tao on his outing in late spring. The whole poem changes from “Xin” (joy) to “Kai” (sigh with emotion) in the sentiment expression. “Xin” is out of the poet’s character of advocating nature. He reposes his temperament and spirit among natural mountains and rivers, and gains peace of mind. “Kai” is because that the ideal society he pursuits has gone forever. Between the “joy” and “emotion”, the poem reveals Yuanming Tao's loneliness that he was unable to discharge.

## 1. Introduction

*Shi Yun* is a four-word poem written by Yuanming Tao during his late spring outing. There are four chapters in the poem. The first two chapters describe scenery he saw in the spring outing. In late spring, the poet wears new clothes and wanders among mountains and rivers of the eastern suburbs. The mist in mountains is beginning to disperse, and there is still a cloud in the air. The world is ethereal, just like a fairyland on earth. The spring breeze comes, and the new seedlings in the field open their wings and dance with the wind. Rivers rise, with cool and clear water which you can wash your hands and feet, and remove the unclean. The scenery is infinite, which is very gratifying. The poet feels comfortable and enjoys himself. “At this, I drink a cup of wine, with mind at ease and eyes ashine.” Everything seems so relaxed and so calm.

However, Yuanming Tao “said ‘self pleasure’, which also revealed a sense of loneliness”. [1] The contents of the last two chapters change from the pleasure of spring outing to the expression of “emotion”. In *The Analects of Confucius*, Xi Zeng once expressed his aspiration. “In this, the last month of spring, with the dress of the season all complete, along with five or six young men who wear crowns, and six or seven boys, I would wash in the Yishui River, enjoy the breeze among the rain altars, and return home singing.” [2] Tao was fascinated by the natural and harmonious scene described by Zeng. Now this lake seemed the same as Yishui at that time. However, there were no young men with crowns or boys returning home with singing. The poet can only stand by the lake alone, looking far away. He recalled that in ancient times, the Yellow Emperor and Tang Yao ruled the world by doing nothing, but that the ideal society had gone far away. The secular world is hustle and bustle, but this is not what I want to do. So I live in the cottage alone, accompanied by flowers, herbs, bamboos and trees, and amuse myself with music and unstrained wine. They can make me happy temporarily. But once I recall that the ideal world has gone, and I can't make friends with ancient sages, I can't help sighing with pain.

## 2. Yuanming Tao's Advocacy of Nature and Wei Jin Metaphysics

Runeng Wen said, “in the preface the author wrote, ‘I travelled alone’; in the last chapter he said, ‘I signed on my loneliness’. The two words have infinite meaning. At that time, the world has long forgotten Jin Dynasty, so Yuanming was definitely alone. He was happy to go out for spring outing, but he had to travel on his own. There’s nobody who can listen to his inner feelings. People can understand his happiness, but cannot understand his emotions. The combination of joy and emotion is also difficult to apprehend. The outing is short, but the implication is far-reaching. Yuanming's inner world is really deep and profound.” [3]

Yuanming Tao's advocacy of nature is related to the metaphysics of Wei and Jin Dynasties, but his enjoyment of landscape is different from that of famous scholars in Wei and Jin Dynasties.

Metaphysics regards the closeness and appreciation of natural landscape as an important aspect of realizing the ideal of free and detached personality life. Indulging in landscape became a good fashion for celebrities, and it was also a kind of accomplishment for them. However, in the eyes of famous scholars in Wei and Jin Dynasties, “‘landscape’ is still a symbol of abstract metaphysics. The real harmony between landscape and the spirit and emotion of the subject cannot be reached.” Yuanming Tao, on the other hand, put the abstract metaphysics into concrete daily life, and no longer regarded landscape as the image of abstract metaphysics. He really achieved the harmony between the subject and the landscape. [4] In *Shi Yun*, Tao is immersed in the joy of mountains and rivers, forgetting everything and enjoying himself. But the fun lasted only a short time, and he soon became glum again. Just as Zongqiang Luo said, “Yuanming Tao's realm of living in harmony with nature is only temporary and exists for a period of time. Why can't he make it all his life? The most fundamental reason is the unavoidable complex in his mind.”[5] This complex mainly refers to Yuanming Tao's political ideal, that is, his yearning and pursuit for an ideal society. This kind of social ideal is similar to metaphysics of Wei and Jin Dynasties in essence.

“Metaphysics in Wei and Jin Dynasties refers to a specific philosophical trend of thought in that period. It takes Laozi and Zhuangzi as the framework, tries to reconcile Confucianism and Taoism, and connects ‘nature’ with ‘the Norm’ (Mingjiao in Chinese; a kind of Confucian ethical code).” [6] The so-called nature in metaphysics is a kind of nature with the fundamental value orientation of the Norm; the so-called Norm is a kind of theory conforming to nature. As a kind of ontological philosophy, metaphysics can not go beyond the value orientation of that era. From the beginning, it did not deny the mainstream status of Confucianism. It simply discussed Taoism. Metaphysics, in essence, is still a way of being a saint inside and a king outside, and a philosophy of going into the society. “Metaphysicians devoted themselves to this discussion with their true feelings to history and reality. Their views on this issue are not so much the calm reflection on pure speculative philosophy, but rather the passionate pursuit of a reasonable society.” [7]

### 3. Value Orientation Tends to Confucianism

The third chapter of *Shi Yun* mentioned the literary quotation of “bathing in Yishui”. It undoubtedly includes the Taoist thought of following nature, but its value orientation still tends to Confucianism. The most direct evidence is the scene, “the boys and girls on their school day, would sing aloud on homeward way.” This timeline was not contained in the original story; it was conceived by Yuanming Tao himself. The children need to finish their school work, which must be Confucian classics. While advocating nature, Tao was still committed to the Confucian moral cultivation and the integration of Confucianism and Taoism. He sighed that the flourishing “Xuantang” no longer existed in *On Unsuccessful Scholars*. The poem then goes as follows. “A river will fork into clear and dirty waters in the long flow, while men will be divided into good and evil in the long run. Among all the human actions, nothing is more precious than the pleasure of doing some benevolent deeds. Men should obey the heavenly laws, and learn the masterpieces of the ancient sages. Men should be loyal to the emperor and pious to their parents, and keep faith to their neighbors. Men should gain distinction by sincerity, and refrain from striving for fame with hypocrisy.”[8] The simple style of ancient times has become a thing of the past. In reality, there are different paths and constant disputes. However, he did not drift with the tide or stay away from worldly affairs. Instead, he insisted on strict conduct and filial piety, remained loyalty to the monarch, and adhered to faith and righteousness. He still obeyed the code of Confucian ethics. It can be seen that Yuanming Tao never gave up his Confucian cultivation, even when he was depressed and frustrated. His Confucianism was influenced by Taoism's “nature” thought, which was consistent with the essence of Metaphysics in Wei and Jin Dynasties. His pursuit of an ideal society was also built based on this.

In the preface of *Shi Yun*, he wrote “I travel alone”. In the last sentence, the author “signed on my loneliness”. The first word describes the loneliness of traveling alone without friends; the second word expresses his feeling of not being able to keep pace with ancients. From reflecting on reality to cherishing the past, and from cherishing the past to reflecting on reality, the author's

bitterness and loneliness can be seen. Other poems and articles of Tao have similar expressions. He often drank wine by himself, and talked to himself. He always has a feeling of loneliness that can't be discharged.

#### 4. Yuanming Tao, Ji Ruan and Kang Ji

Among famous scholars in Wei and Jin Dynasties, the temperament of Ji Ruan and Kang Ji are similar to that of Yuanming Tao. They are all straightforward and sincere people who stay true to the original self in troubled times. Moreover, the thoughts of Ji Ruan and Ji Han in the early stage of their life are very similar to Yuanming Tao. *The Book of Jin: Biography of Ji Ruan* said, "at first, Ruan had the ambition to do good to society. But during the turbulent Wei and Jin Dynasties, famous people cannot protect themselves. So Ruan paid no attention to worldly affairs, and indulged in drinking wine." [9] Ji Ruan usually gives people the impression of profligate and unrestrained, which is not from his original intention. He was forced by the dangerous political environment. Ji Ruan was also committed to the integration of Norm and nature in his early period, and he highly praised the ancient society. However, when Sima's regime slaughtered dissidents and trampled on the Norm, Ji Ruan and Kang Ji collapsed in the face of the darkness of society and the ugliness of human nature. Their ideals and beliefs also collapsed. They took a natural stand and fiercely attacked the absurdity, hypocrisy, cunning and cruelty of the Norm in reality. Kang Ji even expressed, "I despise virtuous Kings such as Shang Tang and King Wu of Zhou, as well as virtuous and loyal ministers such as Confucius. I despise and ignore the rules and thoughts of Confucianism and do whatever I want to do". He went to the other extreme.

The situation of Yuanming Tao is similar to that of Ji Ruan and Kang Ji, but they had different choices in avoiding loneliness. When there was a contradiction between ideal and reality, Ji Ruan and Kang Ji chose to "surpass the Norm and chose the nature." "However, nature could not exist without the norm; real sufferings could not be overcome by the negation of thinking. Therefore, the metaphysical thought of Ji Ruan and Kang Ji led them to a series of theoretical contradictions. Their spiritual realm is like a boat floating in the waves of real life, and will never find the place to rest"[7]. Ji Ruan pretended to be arrogant to escape disaster; Kang Ji was proud and aloof. Only in the ethereal spiritual realm could they eliminate their inner hesitation and loneliness and get temporary relief. Yuanming Tao's inaccessibility lies in the fact that when he abandoned himself to nature, he still stuck to the Norm and firmly believed in his own ideals and beliefs. In the face of the darkness of reality, he did not say fierce words, but calmly withdrew from the officialdom and chose the pastoral landscape as the habitat of his mind. His spiritual realm did not only exist in fantasy. He also had a pure land to repose in reality. However, the pure land only brought Yuanming Tao the temporary joy. He could not "forget himself in rivers and lakes" as Zhuangzi did. He still had an ideal society in his mind, which was beyond his power. Every time he thought about it, he would fall into emotional expression like the poem *Shi Yun*. However, Yuanming Tao was always lonely when he wandered in the mountains and rivers, and thought on the ideal society. At the time of Xin, no one can share it; at the time of Kai, he was unable to practice. Yuanming Tao kept the "Tao" in his mind in this kind of emotion. Runeng Wen said that "Yuanming's inner world is really deep and profound", which is quite an appropriate remark.

#### 5. Conclusion

*Shi Yun* changes from "joy" to "emotion". Its "joy" originates from the beautiful rural landscape in the eastern suburbs, while the "emotion" is due to the fact that the ideal society that the poet yearns for has gone forever. There was no sympathy for Jin Dynasty. But between this "joy" and "emotion", the feelings in this poem are deep and profound.

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