

TAO YUANMING &  
MANUSCRIPT CULTURE

*The Record of a Dusty Table*

XIAOFEI TIAN



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MANUSCRIPT CULTURE:  
The Record of A Dusty Table

XIAOFEI TIAN

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*For my parents*



# CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ix
INTRODUCTION	3
1 POSSESSION & LOSS	23
2 “WHO THE MASTER IS, NO ONE KNOWS”	56
3 LOST HOMESTEADS: RETURNING TO TAO	95
4 FOOD, DEATH, & NARRATION	132
5 BECOMING A VESSEL	174
6 HARD EVIDENCE: READING A STONE	196
CONCLUSION	220
NOTES	226
CHINESE GLOSSARY	275
EDITIONS OF TAO YUANMING’S COLLECTION	289
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	299
INDEX	309



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## Tao Yuanming & Manuscript Culture



## INTRODUCTION

*Thou didst convert my loving dream  
To loathing, and to hate extreme;  
So copyists have oft times slipped  
And quite transformed a manuscript.*

**I**N THE EARLY ELEVENTH CENTURY IN MOORISH SPAIN, AN ARISTOCRATIC Arab scholar, Ibn Hazm (994–1069), wrote a book entitled *The Ring of the Dove*. In this book, Ibn Hazm explored various aspects of love: its origin, signs, and the misfortunes suffered by people in love. The lines above are quoted from a section of the book in which Ibn Hazm maintains that a person may fall in love through merely hearing the description of the other party, without ever setting eyes on him or her. However, if the person someday actually sees the object of his speculative passion, “either his love is confirmed, or it is wholly nullified.” Ibn Hazm then relates a personal story in which love turned to hate when the two parties met each other in real life, and cites his own verse quoted above.<sup>1</sup>

What is of interest here is Ibn Hazm’s reference to the transformation of a manuscript in the hands of copyists and the ambiguity of his simile. If we make the common assumption that a copy is “inferior” to the original, we may then regard a scribe’s copy as the reality in which the two parties meet: it falls so much short of the original manuscript (that is, the description of the beloved) that the reader’s (lover’s) ardor is turned into disgust. However, we might just

as well understand the scribe's copy as being the extravagant description of the beloved, who would be, in this case, compared to the original. But if this is so, then the scribe's copy cannot be said to have "corrupted" the master copy: it must have improved the original version so much as to cause someone to fall in love—with an illusion. In the second reading of the verse, Ibn Hazm would be suggesting that the scribe, through "slipping," has in fact enhanced the quality of the original manuscript.

Hand copying a book may be a practice quite alien to us now, but it was the single most important means of transmission of knowledge and information in the age of manuscript culture. Unlike a printed book, which is always absolutely identical to its fellow copies of the same print run, each hand-copied manuscript is a unique entity. In John Dagenais' words, it "takes on features of orality" in the sense that a handwritten manuscript resembles an oral performance in its occasional and singular nature.<sup>2</sup> Oral poetry is often anonymous: we do not know its exact time and place of origin or its author; a hand-copied text may have an author, but we often no longer have the master copy written out by the author himself or herself. This is particularly true in Chinese manuscript culture, in which the medium of transmission was easily destructible paper, and not, for instance, the more durable parchment or vellum employed in medieval Europe. In such cases, when we do not possess an original master copy made "authoritative" by the author's own hand, we are left only with multiple copies of an illusory source text. The beloved is absent: all we have are descriptions of the beloved, which unfortunately can never convey to us the full picture.

Such a way of thinking about manuscript culture fits a Christian religious model only too well: what we see in this fallen world are no more than imperfect manifestations of the divine. Even in China, where the religious model is missing, the passion for the one and only "origin" prompts scholars to a ceaseless quest. The truth, however, is that any quest for the "original" and hence the "authentic" is rendered essentially meaningless by the unrecoverable absence of a master copy; only such a master copy would give us grounds to decide that one version is superior and another inferior. Ultimately one discovers that the beloved is merely an imagined being who exists in the descriptions only.

Ibn Hazm was an older contemporary of Su Shi (1037–1101), an eminent Chinese literary figure, who lived during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1126). During this period, printing was becoming widespread and replacing manuscript copying as the dominant mode of transmission of knowledge and

information—although, as we shall see, it never completely eclipsed manuscript culture. We may be quite certain that the two men, Ibn Hazm and Su Shi, had never even heard of each other, and yet Su Shi undertook that very task of looking in manuscripts for his beloved: an earlier poet whose works had come down to him in dozens of handwritten copies, each different from the others. He berated the copyists for their careless mistakes, which, in his opinion, had defiled the image of the beloved for more than five hundred years until he, Su Shi, recovered its original brilliance. He thought he had discovered the beloved—the true one—and was elated by his discovery.

Su Shi not only believed that he alone knew what kind of person his beloved poet “really” was, he also felt that this knowledge gave him a particular authority in interpreting the poet’s works and identifying “errors” made by mindless copyists. There is, as we can easily see, one problem with Su Shi’s project: his very understanding of what kind of person the earlier poet was could have come only from those imperfect manuscript copies of his works, passed on to Su Shi by many generations of scribes, editors, and compilers. In order to arrive at the true, uncorrupted image of the beloved earlier poet, Su Shi would have to make corrections to those “bad” manuscript copies. If, by this point, the reader detects a certain irony in Su Shi’s passionate undertaking, he or she is not too far from the truth.

The current book focuses on the poetry of Su Shi’s beloved poet and a cultural icon, Tao Yuanming (also known as Tao Qian, 365?–427), one of the greatest, perhaps also one of the most misunderstood, classical Chinese poets. If he is misunderstood, it is because he has been made into an eternal presence, rather than surviving as an image in texts that were shaped by the force of manuscript culture and subsequent editors.

Tao Yuanming lived towards the end of the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420), when northern China was under non-Chinese rule. The last years of the fourth century were marked by constant uprisings against the declining Jin royal house, until finally Liu Yu (r. 420–422), a powerful general who had earlier helped suppress a major rebellion, replaced the Jin with his own regime, the Song dynasty, usually referred to as the Liu Song to differentiate it from the later dynasty under the same name. Tao Yuanming was born to a once-illustrious family; his great-grandfather was Tao Kan (259–334), a native of the south and one of the most influential political and military figures in early Eastern Jin. By the time Tao Yuanming was born, the Tao family had already lost most of its

influence, though it still maintained some contacts in the court and was obviously considered a prominent southern noble family. Tao Yuanming served in several official posts during his lifetime, but never rose to any high position. His last appointment was that of a county magistrate at Pengze, a place not far from his native town Xunyang (in present-day Jiangxi Province). He was not happy in his post, and in 405, upon the death of his sister, he resigned and went home. He spent the rest of his life at his home estate in quiet reclusion, although he apparently kept up his friendships with local and court officials, drinking and exchanging poetry with them. These friends included the contemporary literary celebrity Yan Yanzhi (384–456), who wrote an elegy for Tao after his death in 427.

Tao Yuanming's poetry and prose were known to his contemporaries, and after his death his works continued to circulate. The first well-known editor of Tao Yuanming's works was Xiao Tong (501–531), the Crown Prince of Resplendent Brilliance (Zhaoming Taizi) of the Liang, and the compiler of the most influential pre-Tang literary anthology. Xiao Tong deeply admired Tao Yuanming's writings. During the Tang (618–907), Tao Yuanming was appreciated largely as a drinker and as a recluse who held fast to his principles. Although a small number of well-known Tang poets were obviously influenced by him, including Wang Ji (590?–644), Wang Wei (701–761), and Wei Yingwu (ca. 733–793), he remained only one of many famous pre-Tang poets—until he was singled out as *the* pre-Tang poet by Su Shi and his coterie about five hundred years after his death.

This book originated from a simple observation. A few years ago, in the course of preparing for a graduate seminar, I reread Tao Yuanming's poetry. The modern critical edition I was using, compiled by the great Shandong scholar Lu Qinli (1910–1973), contains a number of textual variants. These textual variants have not usually been taken very seriously by Chinese commentators and scholars of past and present—the only exception to the rule being a variant in one of Tao Yuanming's poems on drinking, which was made famous by none other than Su Shi himself as an example of how copyists could “transform a manuscript” in an unforgivable way. Many modern editions choose to exclude textual variants, no doubt considering them superfluous and irrelevant, or they include only a small number of them. In Lu Qinli's edition, however, the variants conveniently appear in a smaller font under the poetic lines, which are printed vertically, starting from right to left, in keeping with the traditional Chinese book format. As I was reading along, I noticed that

if I inserted one of those variants in smaller fonts into the poem proper, I would have a completely different poetic line—sometimes exactly opposite to the meaning of the commonly accepted version. In more than one case, the choice of a different textual variant altered not just the line but also changed the whole poem.

From my “discovery,” many questions naturally follow: since an “authoritative” or “definitive” edition stamped with the author’s approval is nowhere to be found, what makes an editor of Tao Yuanming’s works decide to choose one variant over another? Certainly we can exclude “later” variants; but our repertoire of variants comes largely from the Northern Song, which produced the editions on which modern editions are based. How many variants have been lost in the course of well more than a thousand years as a result of copyists’ and editors’ dismissal and exclusion? And what does it mean to ask such questions? One thing, however, remains certain: just underneath the smooth, fixed surface of a modern printed edition is a chaotic and unstable world. This is the world of manuscript culture, a few of whose traces remain in these variants.

As mentioned previously, because of the fragility of their medium, early manuscripts produced in China have largely disappeared. The famous manuscripts of the Tang and the Five Dynasties (907–960) from the Dunhuang grottos of northwestern China, protected by the dry weather of the desert and by their geographical isolation, are a rare case of survival. From some of the writings of the same period, however, we may still catch a glimpse of the fascinating process of a manuscript’s metamorphosis, and recognize the essential fluid nature of manuscript culture. I will give two examples, one being the author himself changing the text after he discovered, to his indignation, that his poetry had been altered beyond his own recognition; the other being a woman “fixing” the text she was given to copy. The first example is the account given to us by the late-Tang monk Guanxiu (late ninth–early tenth century) in his preface to a series of twenty-four quatrains “On Dwelling in the Mountains” (Shanju shi):

I wrote a set of twenty-four quatrains, “On Dwelling in the Mountains,” during my stay at Zhongling in the fourth and fifth year of the Xiantong reign [860–873]. As soon as I put down my brush, someone took away the draft. Afterwards, some of the poems were written on the walls; some passed from mouth to mouth, and I occasionally heard one or two chanted by people. They were all full of errors. Since the *xinchou* year of the Qianfu reign [881], I have been hiding in the mountain monastery

from the bandits.<sup>3</sup> I happened to get hold of a complete copy; the style was uncultivated and vulgar, the tone base and low. How could I bear letting gentlemen of refined taste hear them like this? So one day I took out my brush and revised them: some I kept, some I deleted, some I corrected, and some I added to. Then again I completed twenty-four of them, and they shine with elegance.<sup>4</sup>

Guanxiu's preface shows us that the poems were literally like the poet's progeny, taken away from him when first born and then growing up into something he could no longer recognize. The poet seems to have completely lost control of his products; only by sheer chance did he "get hold of a complete copy."

The next example provides us with the missing link by allowing us to see exactly *how* a text undergoes transformation when it is out of the hands of the author. We have a story told by Gao Yanxiu, a writer living in the ninth century. The story says that there was a young man surnamed Wei who had acquired a sixteen-year-old courtesan as his concubine. He was infatuated with her, not only because she was beautiful and had talent in music but also because she was very literary. "He asked her to transcribe the poetry of Du Fu [712–770], but the copy they acquired was full of errors and lacunae. As she was copying, she made corrections along the way, and the writings became clear and comprehensible. Because of this Wei was quite taken with her."<sup>5</sup>

The second example shows us just how differently, how vigorously, and indeed how aggressively, a medieval Chinese reader related to literary works. Such a realization might be baffling and troublesome for a modern reader, who is used to the stability and fixity of printed books, definitive editions, copyright laws, and the notion of intellectual property. In modern times, we can still be changed by our reading, but we usually do not change our reading materials. In the age of manuscript culture, however, a scribe—a particular sort of reader—could participate actively, confidently, in the reproduction of the works of Du Fu, one of the greatest classical Chinese poets, and the scribe might have been just about any literate person—a professional copyist, an illustrious member of the literati, a nobleman, a literate but hardly learned commoner, or a talented courtesan. He or she could have worked for pay, for love of poetry, or for love of a person. To the degree that they were engaged in the production of manuscript copies by copying, editing, altering, and revising, we are no longer talking about the readers' reception of a stable text, but about the readers' dynamic participation in the very process of creating a text that is

essentially protean. In such a paradigm, the author is still important, but the author no longer occupies the stable central position as an all-powerful and controlling presence in relation to his or her work.

In an article entitled “Book Culture and Textual Transmission in Sung China,” Susan Cherniack discusses textual volatility in the Song in relation to the rise of printing. She argues that errors in printed texts affected a much larger readership because each manuscript was unique and so “the impact of errors occurring in any single manuscript was limited to a comparatively small circle of readers.”<sup>6</sup> This is certainly true, but printed copies also “contain” or limit the number of variants produced every time a new copy is made, while every handwritten copy is liable to produce new variants, sometimes copy errors and sometimes deliberate alterations, and so increase the total number of variants.

From the anecdote about Wei’s concubine, we also learn that textual variants do not come only from copyists’ careless mistakes; they are also a consequence of self-conscious editing: filling in lacunae and correcting what are regarded as errors. To a large measure, this was what the Northern Song editors were doing when preparing a printed edition. Faced with not just one handwritten copy of a poet’s collection but sometimes many copies, they had to choose “the right reading” from a variety of variants; in some cases, they were faced with the discrepancy between words transmitted on paper and those in stele inscriptions. Ouyang Xiu’s (1007–1072) collated edition of the Tang writer Han Yu (768–824) was universally acclaimed as a “fine edition” (*shanben*), but when he later compared it with the stele inscriptions of Han Yu’s prose, to his dismay he discovered “many errors,” and “from now on I know it is very common for texts to lose their genuineness during the long course of their transmission.”<sup>7</sup>

Northern Song scholars, critics, and commentators inherited the scattered and messy remains of Tang manuscript culture; and, perhaps in part because of the increasingly prominent role of printing, for the first time in history disagreements among handwritten manuscript copies were noticed with passionate concern. This may be a good example of how material culture and technology can change people’s perception of the world. Ye Mengde’s (1077–1148) *Remarks Recorded While Avoiding the Heat* (*Bishu luhua*) tells the story of a fanatic lover of Du Fu, who would pester his colleagues by constantly talking about Du Fu’s poetry. Sometimes, in the heat of an argument, he would ask one of the clerks to go and fetch his copy of Du Fu’s poems; if the clerk brought him a copied version (*luben*), he would look at the clerk angrily and

yell at him, “Why didn’t you get the genuine copy (*zhenben*) in my collection?”<sup>8</sup> We do not quite know what a *zhenben* was as opposed to a *luben*—was it an original handwritten copy from the Tang as opposed to what had been copied out by the man himself?—but the point of the anecdote is the intense awareness of the “genuineness” (implying “the original”) of an edition, a concern that one rarely finds in the Tang. Collation, ever an important activity, took on a particularly poignant urgency in the Northern Song. In extreme cases, finely collated editions even affected the real estate business: Zhu Bian (?–1144) writes in *Old Stories Heard at Quwei* (Quwei jiuwen) that the books in Song Minqiu’s (1019–1079) family book collection had all been collated three or five times and were therefore considered “fine editions” (*shanben*). Song Minqiu lived in Chunming Ward (Chunming Fang), and those elite literati members who loved reading would often choose to live in the same neighborhood to be able to borrow books from him. As a result, houses in Chunming Ward became twice as expensive as those in other areas.<sup>9</sup>

We know that Tao Yuanming’s poetry was already disseminated during his lifetime, at least among his friends. In his preface to the series of poems “On Drinking” (Yinjiu), he recounts how he “asked my old friend [or friends] to copy the poems out, so as to provide some diversion.” By the beginning of the Northern Song, there existed a large number of manuscript copies of Tao Yuanming’s writings. According to a colophon written to Tao Yuanming’s collection by Song Xiang (996–1066),

Nowadays there are a number of private and official editions [of Tao Yuanming’s works], all different from what is documented in the two historical records [i.e., *The Sui History* and *The Old Tang History*].<sup>10</sup> The one divided into eight *juan* [originally a scroll, later a unit of division for a Chinese book] was edited by the Crown Prince Zhaoming of Liang. The preface, Tao Yuanming’s biography, and his elegy are collected into one *juan* and put at the very beginning, followed by the collection proper, but the table of contents has been lost. The one divided into ten *juan* was edited by Vice Director Yang<sup>11</sup>. . . . Over the years I have acquired only a paltry number of copies, which comes to no more than several dozens, and I never knew which version was the right one.<sup>12</sup>

Another Northern Song scholar, Cai Qi (or Cai Juhou, ca. 1109), gives us to understand that “there are so many editions of Tao Yuanming’s poetry these

days that collators encounter endless variants. Sometimes for one character there are dozens of variants, which cannot possibly be all listed.”<sup>13</sup>

To know “which version was the right one” plagued Northern Song literary scholars, and they spent much time and effort sorting out this bewildering manuscript legacy. Liu Kai (947–1000), an aggressive editor, tampered with more than five thousand and seven hundred characters when he was collating the Tang writer Han Yu’s collection.<sup>14</sup> Tao Yuanming’s writings, like the rest of pre-Song literary output, have come down to us through the mediation of the Song literary values, and to understand this editorial practice is of vital importance to our approach to Tao Yuanming’s poetry, whose deceptive simplicity is partially the doing of the Northern Song editors.

To a modern scholar, this editorial practice may often seem alarmingly arbitrary. Su Shi once cited a line by Du Fu, in which a character, *mo* 沒, “to disappear,” was reportedly changed by Song Minqiu into *bo* 波, “the waves,” so that “The white gull disappears into the boundless waters” became something like “The white gull [flies] over the boundless waves,” as Song Minqiu believed that gulls did not know how to “disappear into the waters.”<sup>15</sup> The anonymous collection of anecdotes *Pure Chat at Daoshan* (Daoshan qinghua, ca. early twelfth century) reports the following story:

Du Fu’s poem “Sleeping over at Longmen” [Su Longmen] has a line, “Constellations’ woof presses close against the Heaven’s towers” [Tian que xiang wei bi 天闕象緯逼]. Wang Anshi [1021–1086] changed the second character *que* 闕 to *yue* 闕. Huang Tingjian [1045–1105] strongly endorsed the change in public. Liu Gongfu [Liu Bin, 1022–1088], upon hearing of this, said, “You’ve got to be afraid of that guy!”<sup>16</sup>

Wang Anshi’s confident editorial approach also caught the attention of Cai Qi:

Du Fu’s collection circulating nowadays was collated by Imperial Academician Wang Yuanshu [the courtesy name of Wang Zhu, 997–1057]. Whenever he saw a variant, he would preserve it in a note and did not want to do away with it. By the time Wang Jinggong [the honorary title of Wang Anshi] edited *The Anthology of A Hundred Masters*, he would ponder the question and then choose his preferred version to make a definitive edition. For example, the line “The master is more talented

than Qu and Song” has an editorial note [by Wang Zhu] saying, “Or as ‘Sometimes the master talks about Qu and Song.’” Wang Anshi then replaced the character in the text proper with the variant. . . . Such examples are so numerous that they cannot be listed one by one. The appropriateness of his choices is obvious.<sup>17</sup>

Cai Qi also notes that Wang Anshi sometimes simply changed what he thought was unreasonable in the text to something that he believed would make the most sense.

What “aggressive” editors such as Liu Kai, Song Minqiu, and Wang Anshi did to the manuscripts is little different from what Wei’s concubine had done; and exactly how they decided which variant to choose or what alternative character to “fill in” is an intriguing question. As we can see from Wang Anshi’s editorial principles, the usual tactic seems to choose what “makes the most sense” in the context. Such a preference for the “easier reading,” of course, is a highly problematic criterion in textual scholarship: “sense” is historically contingent, and what makes sense to contemporary readers may easily lose its transparency in a later age. This, as I will try to show in later chapters, is in fact what happens regarding the choice of textual variants in Tao Yuanming’s poetry: the word that makes the most obvious sense often prevails over the word that does not fit into the context in any self-evident way—and yet the rejected, “more difficult” reading may be explained by allusions and references probably quite familiar to Tao Yuanming’s contemporaries. Literature is not a transcendental, self-contained entity immune to the interaction of a field of historical, social, and cultural forces; but for premodern Chinese readers, faith in direct communication with an ancient author often eclipsed the sense of temporal distance between them—to the degree that the ancient author became an eternally present figure, impervious to change and unbound by the mores of his or her times.

This is particularly true in the case of Tao Yuanming, who is considered the archetypal recluse, and who, in the modern age, has been treated as a poet who represents something “quintessentially Chinese.” In other words, Tao Yuanming is not only taken out of his historical circumstances, but is also restricted to a rather fixed image. Although scholars and critics have tried to complicate such an image by pointing out Tao Yuanming’s discontent and struggle with his decision to give up public service for a reclusive life, the basic aspects of Tao Yuanming as a man and a poet have been set in place: a lofty-minded

recluse, intensely loyal to the declining and later overthrown Jin dynasty; a spontaneous, willful, unconventional person who is often portrayed as drinking excessively, both in his own works and in visual arts of the later period (mostly post-Tang); a poet who chooses to pursue self-fulfillment through a set of private values rather than through public life, who finds contentment and pleasure in retirement and leisure, who defies material hardship for the sake of adhering to his personal principles, and who writes natural, unaffected, and simple poetry of nature in celebration of such a lifestyle. The perception of Tao Yuanming as an intense Jin loyalist, although with a long history, was particularly endorsed by Southern Song neo-Confucians, who must have discovered a special pathos in Tao Yuanming's loyalty, in that it could be easily related to their own times. The fall of the Northern Song into the hands of the "barbarian" rulers was only too similar to the end of the Western Jin (265–317), and the constantly threatened security of the Southern Song reminded them of the situation of Tao Yuanming's own dynasty, the Eastern Jin. Although there is in fact nothing in Tao Yuanming's own poetry and prose that suggests such loyalist sentiment, it has not only become one of the hallmarks of Tao Yuanming's personality since the Song but also a guiding principle in the interpretation of his writings, sometimes leading to extremely tenuous and distorted explications, as in the famous case of his most obscure poem, "An Account of Ale" (Shu jiu). In the modern age, the issue of loyalty in Tao Yuanming studies does not provoke the same kind of passionate interest as it did in imperial China, but other aspects of the traditional image of Tao Yuanming still prevail, and sometimes take on a no less poignant urgency, for, in the nation-building project of the twentieth century, elements of Tao Yuanming's works—such as the harmony between man and nature believed to be exemplified in his poetry about farming—have for many people come to define the essence of "Chinese art" and "Chinese culture." The argument that Tao Yuanming's poetry is "not really unadorned and plain," that he was able to endure inner conflicts and doubts about his life decisions, and that he suffered from anger and anguish at the usurpers and rebels of his age, only serves to confirm the established image of Tao Yuanming and his works.

We cannot know which variant is "right," but we can see to some degree the historical motivation for choosing one variant over another and the version of Tao Yuanming that has been suppressed by such choices. These commonplace opinions about Tao Yuanming and the desire for the stability of his image have had a profound impact on the choice of textual variants in Tao

Yuanming's works. Which character may be kept in the text proper and which must be removed to a note (typically beginning with *yi zuo* 一作, "also as X," and, if there are more variants for the same character, *you zuo* 又作, "or as Y") becomes an editorial decision invested with ideological significance. The most famous example is the controversy over *jian* 見 (to see) and *wang* 望 (to gaze at) initiated by Su Shi; we will discuss this controversy at some length in the first chapter. Elsewhere in the Tao Yuanming collection, however, we see many more cases in which a textual variant makes a great difference in understanding a poem. In the aggregate such cases alter the entire landscape of Tao Yuanming's poetry and prompt us to reconsider many things about the poet: he may turn out, as this book shall endeavor to show, both much more embedded in the literary and philosophical interests of his age and much more innovative, playful, quirky, and wistful than his accepted image. In counterpoint to the earnestness celebrated by generations of scholars and critics, we may in fact find in Tao Yuanming's poetry a strong sense of irony about the world and about himself, a more perverse turn of mind, and great discomfort and anxiety about the dark forces of nature—despite the pious repetition about how the poet yearns for the liberating power of nature and feels at home in his "gardens and fields."

In a study of various editions of Tao Yuanming's collection, contemporary scholar Yuan Xingpei points out that the number of variants recorded in various printed editions of Tao Yuanming's works from the Southern Song to early Yuan seem to have decreased: the edition dating roughly from after 1124 (the *Jigu ge* edition), for example, has over seven hundred and forty places where the editor notes variants (in a corpus of one hundred and twenty-seven poems and various prose pieces—by no means a large body of work); these include both single characters and phrases or even whole lines, not to mention those cases in which one character has two or three variants (so that the total number of textual variants in this edition could well exceed a thousand). An edition with a colophon dated 1140 only has somewhat over two hundred textual notes, and the extent of its recorded variants does not go beyond the *Jigu ge* edition; Tang Han's edition (ca. mid-thirteenth century) has about a hundred and forty-three notes for textual variants;<sup>18</sup> and finally, the later Li Gonghuan edition has no more than six.<sup>19</sup> We should be aware that what we have now are no more than a fraction of the Song and Yuan printed editions no longer extant; and yet, if we only look at these editions and these figures, there seems to be a steady pattern of reducing and limiting the number of

variants, a process that parallels the increasing stabilization of the image of Tao Yuanming.

Yuan Xingpei discusses three kinds of textual variants which could affect the meaning of a line: those that have to do with “rhetorical merit,” those that contain correct or incorrect information, and those that concern the chronology of Tao Yuanming’s life.<sup>20</sup> Of the three categories, the last could become a point of controversy among the numerous scholars devoted to compiling Tao Yuanming’s chronology, determining the year of his birth, and dating Tao Yuanming’s writings; but such variants are not of central concern to the current book, nor do they affect our reading of Tao Yuanming’s works in any significant way. In the second category, we find that variants appear due to the discovery of “error” in Tao Yuanming’s quotations from ancient sources. That is, if an editor or scribe noticed that the poet “made a mistake” in citation, he would correct the mistake and delegate, if he were so disposed, the “erroneous” text to a footnote. This is regarded as “improving” a manuscript, and we may be reasonably sure that the editor or scribe may not have deemed it necessary to record every such emendation. Such an “error,” however, might simply have come from a manuscript copy of the source different from what we have now, available in Tao Yuanming’s age, but no longer extant. It is, of course, also possible that Tao Yuanming made a mistake.

The first category of textual variants discussed by Yuan Xingpei is of particular interest and importance to us here, and yet it seems that finer differentiation is called for than simply describing such variants in terms of “rhetorical merit” (*xiuci*). There are editorial choices based on relatively straightforward aesthetic grounds: in the line cited by Yuan Xingpei as an example, “Days and months toss a person away and leave him behind,” “to toss” (*zhi* 擲), which is generally favored by editors and appears in all standard editions in the text proper, has a textual variant, “to sweep off” (*sao* 掃). There are, however, also textual variants that embody fierce ideological differences beneath a thin veil of aesthetic concerns: *jian* and *wang*, for instance, can hardly be said to merely imply a preference for superior artistry. While *jian*, “to see,” is considered more spontaneous, more accidental, and so more natural, *wang*, “to gaze at,” is seen as entailing too much effort. Since Tao Yuanming is regarded as *the* genuine person who always acts according to the dictates of his nature, only *jian* could represent the “genuine” Tao Yuanming.

This word play on “genuine” took on particular significance in late imperial China, when discovering the true Tao Yuanming and acquiring a rare early

printed edition of Tao Yuanming's collection were passions so closely intertwined that they became hardly separable. This coincided with the popularization of printing (especially the explosive growth of publishing during the second half of the sixteenth century), the booming book market, the obsession with private book collecting, and a rise in the value of Song and Yuan editions. There were over two hundred famous book collectors in the Ming and more than five hundred in the Qing, their total number far exceeding any previous period in Chinese history.<sup>21</sup> For such collectors, Song books were the most prized—for being the earliest printed editions (and so best representing the “original” texts), for their legendary printing quality and elegant script styles, and for their scarcity. From the book collectors' ecstatic celebration of the appearance, the smell, and the “feel” of a rare Song edition, one is tempted to conclude that texts were in fact treasured less for their content than for their materiality: an old book is definitely not just for reading; it is also to be cherished as a beautiful, costly, much-desired object. There are numerous stories about how book dealers produced fake Song editions to make a profit,<sup>22</sup> as well as stories of how book collectors used every means—from economic reward, political pressure, sexual attraction, to outright hoodwinking and cheating—to acquire a coveted rare book. As we shall see, Song and Yuan editions of Tao Yuanming's collection, particularly one supposedly written out by Su Shi (or more likely in the calligraphic style of Su Shi), became just such objects of desire, much sought after and fought over.

Many of the Ming and Qing book collectors were also scholars, collators, and bibliographers. There was a correlation between the high commercial value put on the increasingly rare early editions and the intense preoccupation with recovering the “true essence” of ancient authors. It was during the Qing that study of editions (*banben xue*) and textual studies (*jiaokan xue*) became independent and reflective branches of scholarship.<sup>23</sup> Huang Pilie (1763–1825), one of the greatest book collectors and bibliographers of the Qing, is a representative figure. Living during the peaceful reigns of the Qianlong and Jiaqing emperors, he was very much part of the so-called Qian-Jia school (*Qian Jia xuepai*), which focused its attention on philology and bibliography, on collation and annotation of the classics, and on textual studies in general. True to the spirit of the Qian-Jia school, Huang Pilie believed in “seeking the ancient” and “seeking the genuine,” the two goals often seen as being one. He once wrote, “Each and every single thing written by an ancient author has his soul and spirit in it. It is where his thread of life was attached, which is why

it could live so long. However, as time passes by, it may become hidden, and to shine forth again it must depend on posterity's collecting what has been scattered and consulting the old records. This is why it is so important for us to seek out the ancient."<sup>24</sup> In terms of his concrete collecting and collating activities, seeking the ancient and the genuine meant that the earlier printed editions (which should be understood as Song editions) or earlier handwritten manuscript copies were invariably considered better than the later ones, for they could, in Huang Pilie's opinion, best reflect the "original" form of a classic and bring out the spirit of an ancient author. The one good thing about Huang Pilie's devout reverence for early editions is that he was extremely cautious in his collation, always recording every textual variant he encountered; but the negative aspect is also obvious: the refusal to realize the intrinsically unstable nature of texts in manuscript culture reinforces the illusion that despite great problems in textual transmission, we can still perfectly recover antiquity. It must be added here that the fluidity of manuscript culture did not stop in the Northern Song with the spread of printing. For one thing, people continued to copy books on a large scale throughout imperial China: Chen Xianxing points out that of the fifty-six thousand, seven hundred and eighty-seven titles recorded in *A Catalogue of Fine Editions of Chinese Classics* (*Zhongguo shanben guji shumu*), more than half are handwritten manuscripts.<sup>25</sup> For another thing, in Chinese woodblock printing, even a printed edition requires copying a manuscript—this is how printing blocks are prepared.<sup>26</sup> And yet, the particular nature of manuscript culture and the various issues it raises have yet to be recognized by Chinese scholars today. Although books on print culture sometimes include a section or two on manuscripts, it is often no more than a perfunctory mention, and the focus largely remains on the "correct," the "original," the "authentic."

As said before, the quest for the genuine (*zhen*) acquires a special resonance in reading Tao Yuanming. Textual variants are rejected or criticized because they do not represent the "genuine" Tao Yuanming and so they cannot be "genuine"—they are either careless errors or changes made by "shallow" or "vulgar" people who have failed to understand Tao Yuanming's intention—then the purged and purified text is used as an evidence of Tao Yuanming's "genuineness," which implies both the authenticity of the "original" Tao Yuanming and the spontaneity and total lack of self-consciousness that is seen as the quintessential characteristic of Tao Yuanming's personality. The desire for textual stability blends in perfectly with the ideological desire for the poet as a

more or less one-dimensional monument, the foundation on which the stable text is based. Tao Yuanming and his poetry are woven into a grand cultural myth which figures prominently in the construction of a modern national culture.<sup>27</sup> In such a myth, the man and his work represent something “born of nature” and miraculously retaining its “natural” state, an artlessness held as the highest literary and moral ideal. Tao Yuanming is regarded as an inherent constituent of the “Chinese national character,” and for this reason, his person and his poetry have to be perfectly consistent (because we get to know the person mainly through his poetry). He is not even allowed any self-consciousness in writing about himself, for in many people’s eyes self-consciousness compromises a person’s earnestness and even amounts to being a “fake.” This lack of self-consciousness does not mean lack of self-doubt, which Tao Yuanming is permitted to have in abundance (because it only highlights his nobility in his final decision to follow the dictates of his heart); it means that he did not think of himself as a “poet”—he was just “living” and then happened to write some poetry, which fortuitously happened to have been very well preserved; he was also totally unaware of how he looked in the eyes of the world because he did not care for it. In all these portrayals Tao Yuanming somehow emerges as extremely simple and transparent (just like his poetry), a monolithic figure untouched by the institutions and mores of his age. Any challenge to such an image of Tao Yuanming—any suggestion that Tao Yuanming was actually a sophisticated poet—is resisted with a vehemence rarely seen in discussions of any other premodern Chinese poet, not even Du Fu, commonly acknowledged as perhaps the greatest.<sup>28</sup>

Instead of showing how readers received Tao Yuanming’s works, this book will demonstrate how they actually participated in a most active manner in producing Tao Yuanming, and will outline the trajectory along which Tao Yuanming was constructed in manuscript culture and afterward. There is a significant difference between studying readers’ reception of a poet’s works and studying the impact of manuscript culture on a poet’s works; while the former presumes textual stability and the authoritative control of an author, the latter seeks to expose any such comfortable conventional notion of text and authorship as an illusion. Readers do not simply interpret a work differently over time, but shape the very text to their interpretation. This book also intends to bring Tao Yuanming back into the historical, social, cultural, and literary contexts in which he was deeply embedded. Only when we see to what

a great extent he was one with his age can we better appreciate his departures from tradition. Rather than seeking to subvert the established assumptions about Tao Yuanming, I hope to add new dimensions to them, so that one may finally come to recognize the protean world of manuscript culture, and discover not just one “Work” by the essentialized Tao Yuanming, but multiple texts continuously produced long after the author’s physical demise. The following chapters will strive to show that the “genuine” Tao Yuanming is no more than one version of realization of the image of Tao among many, a product of ideological and social assumptions that prove too partial, too historically unspecific, to be effective.

Chapter one revolves around the concept of acquisition in reading Tao Yuanming’s poetry: how a desire to acquire the true meaning of the master leads to actively controlling the texts of his poems—by choosing the “right” variants—and how such a desire is intricately bound up with the intellectual and cultural issues of the Northern Song. In late imperial China, acquiring the essence of the poet became physically embodied in the possession of a Song printed edition of his works: such a printed edition was a thing of great cultural and commercial value. Chapter two discusses “who Tao Yuanming really is” by comparing and contrasting his four biographies, which are often used as an independent “historical context” to interpret Tao Yuanming’s works and edit them. Scholars and commentators either try to reconcile any discrepancy between the biographies and Tao Yuanming’s writings, or, if there is anything that contradicts the conventional view of the poet, they choose to ignore it. In this chapter, I will show how the construction of Tao Yuanming in the biographies is, in fact, based on Tao Yuanming’s own projection of his image in his poetry and prose, guided by the Six Dynasties discourse of reclusion, and influenced by different ideological inclinations.

Tao Yuanming is regarded as the fountainhead of a kind of poetry called “farmstead poetry” (*tianyuan shi*), whose main theme is a reclusive life (as opposed to active service in the government) lived out in “the fields and gardens”—a pastoral setting. Much ink has been spilled on Tao Yuanming’s basic contentment with his farming life and his whole-hearted enjoyment of nature. Chapter three will take up some of his best-known farming poems, and, by considering those textual variants that are usually left in notes, reveal a Tao Yuanming who perhaps had a much more troubled relationship with nature than is usually thought, and a Tao Yuanming who is quite self-conscious

about “being a farmer”—and yet can only be a spectator standing outside the farming community, reflecting on his own alienation and “difference/strangeness” (*yi* 異).

Perhaps because Tao Yuanming’s poetry is characterized as essentially artless and plain, and because his poems have been reduced to rather transparent readings by ideological editorial practice, much critical energy in modern Tao Yuanming studies has been directed to discussions about whether Tao Yuanming is primarily Confucian or Daoist or both, and whether one can discern a hint of Buddhism in his writings as well. These philosophical inclinations are often seen as exerting a combined influence on the poet. Sometimes he is identified more exclusively with one philosophical orientation than with another, and great ideological weight is often invested in the differentiation. The unfortunate consequence is that the “poetry” in Tao Yuanming’s poetry is ignored; we may tend to forget that Tao Yuanming is, first of all, a poet, and a great one. Poetry may certainly contain philosophical points, but good poetry is always more than its philosophical points, and it is this “surplus” that makes it poetry in the first place. Unlike philosophical treatises, poetry is less systematic and more occasional, emerging from those fleeting moments whose historical circumstances frequently elude us. Despite passionate efforts by later scholars and critics to reconstruct a poet’s life year by year or even day by day, so that those moments from which a poem is born may be recovered, we know that any such reconstruction will always remain imperfect. We have only the poems themselves to work with; these may echo the intellectual issues of an age, but such issues are fused into something which cannot be pinned down to a consistent, well-organized system of thought. Chapters four and five will treat some of Tao Yuanming’s central concerns as concretely realized in the poetic images and motifs of his poetry. These chapters will attempt to delineate Tao Yuanming’s complicated relationship with his contemporary world by demonstrating how his favorite subjects grow out of conventional literary themes and are closely intertwined with concurrent cultural practices, yet manage to emerge in unique and unusual ways.

Finally, chapter six takes us away from Tao Yuanming’s poetry to a rock found in Tao Yuanming’s home region, “The Drunken Stone,” on which it is said the poet left behind bodily traces. Going through strange mutations and mutilations, generating numerous, often conflicting, accounts, inscribed over and over again, the material embodiment of Tao Yuanming in a stone provides us with a good allegory of how the poet becomes petrified in a hard

surface and yet how even then he manages to elude us, through textual fluctuation, corruption, and permutations.

In her engaging book *Unediting the Renaissance*, which offers refreshing insights into the “vast array of possibilities” denied to us by modern standard editions, Leah S. Marcus eloquently argues for the particular relevance textual instability and materiality have for contemporary students and scholars:

As both computer technology and poststructuralist theory have made inroads into the field of literary studies, most of us have come to think of texts as more malleable, less fixed, than we did before. If texts are generated by computer, the idea of the “original” loses much of its charisma: how can we reliably differentiate “originals” from copies? Printing out our own computer-generated work, we have ourselves become printers and designers on a small scale, and may therefore take more interest in past modes of book production and the ways in which format can influence interpretation. The “new philology” investigates textual instability at a grassroots, material level.<sup>29</sup>

On this level, literary writings should no longer be considered as existing “in the mind or intent of the author,” rising above the material form of manuscripts and printed books which are “‘simply objects of utility,’ ‘vessels’ for conveyance of their contents.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, each manuscript and printed edition is a unique historical performance by copyists, editors, commentators, wood-block cutters, and book collectors who one after another leave their traces on it and therefore change it.

We are living in a transition period much like the one experienced by the editors and scholars of the Northern Song, who felt anxiety and discomfort about the rise of printing; people no longer related to reading as they had when the main method of transmitting knowledge was to copy everything. Although the Internet culture in which the younger generation feels right at home is rather immaterial, it curiously resembles manuscript culture in its multiplicity, its very lack of center, certainty, and authority. Having grown up with the printed book myself, I realize that this could be very unsettling, but it could also be liberating. It is, as a matter of fact, an allegory of the human condition.

Song Shou (991–1041), the father of Song Minqiu (who did not believe in

gulls merging with waves), was an avid book collector as well as a collator. He once said that collating manuscripts was like sweeping dust: as soon as one brushed it off, it began to gather again.<sup>31</sup> The dusty table is therefore a perfect metaphor not only for collating and editing but also for an excursion into the messy world of manuscript culture. Tao Yuanming would certainly understand, as he knew better than anyone else about the chaos of nature, which is constantly threatening the fragile human order imposed on it.