### **T’ao Ch’ien**

**(a.d.  365–427)**

T’ao Ch’ien was born into a family of prominent but impoverished government officials. As an adult, T’ao Ch’ien himself began a career in government service, but he found it difficult to behave in the subservient manner required of lower-ranking officials. When he was about thirty-five, he resigned from office and retired to a farm on the outskirts of a rural village.

In his later years, T’ao Ch’ien devoted most of his energy to writing poetry. Inspired by the serenity of his life in the countryside, T’ao Ch’ien wrote many poems about the simple beauty of the landscapes surrounding farms and villages. In addition to showing his love for nature, T’ao Ch’ien’s poetry reveals his passion for some of his favorite activities—farming, spending time with his family, and writing poetry.



**Background**

T’ao Ch’ien was among the finest “old style” *shih* poets. In classical Chinese, each line of a *shih* poem has the same number of syllables, words, and characters. Classical Chinese is not written with letters; instead, characters stand for words. For example, the character means “tree” or “wood.” T’ao Ch’ien’s simple, direct style is easy to enjoy in translation, but his carefully formed structure, unfortunately, is not preserved.

Rich or poor, wise or foolish, people are all busy clinging jealously to their lives. And it’s such delusion. So, I’ve presented as clearly as I could the sorrows of Form and Shadow. Then, to dispel those sorrows, Spirit explains occurrence coming naturally of itself. Anyone who’s interested in such things will see what I mean.

**1 Form Addresses Shadow**

 Heaven and earth last. They’ll never end.

 Mountains and rivers know no seasons,

 and there’s a timeless law plants and trees

 follow: frost then dew, vigor then ruin.

5They call us earth’s most divine and wise

 things, but we alone are never as we are

 again. One moment we appear in this world,

 and the next, we vanish, never to return.

 And who notices one person less? Family?

10Friends? They only remember when some

 everyday little thing you’ve left behind

 pushes grief up to their eyes in tears.

 I’m no immortal. I can’t just soar away

 beyond change. There’s no doubt about it,

15death’s death. Once you see that, you’ll

 see that turning down drinks is for fools.

**2 Shadow Replies**

 Who can speak of immortality when simply

 staying alive makes such sad fools of us?

 We long for those peaks of the immortals,

20but they’re far-off, and roads trail away

 early. Coming and going together, we’ve

 always shared the same joys and sorrows.

 Resting in shade, we may seem unrelated,

 but living out in the sun, we never part.

25This togetherness isn’t forever, though.

 Soon, we’ll smother in darkness. The body

 can’t last, and all memory of us also ends.

 It sears the five feelings. But in our

 good works, we bequeath our love through

30generations. How can you spare any effort?

 Though it may be true wine dispels sorrow,

 how can such trifles ever compare to this?

**3 Spirit Answers**

 The Great Potter**1**

 These ten thousand things thrive each

35of themselves alone. If humans rank with

 heaven and earth, isn’t it because of me?

 And though we’re different sorts of things

 entirely, we’ve been inseparable since

 birth, together through better and worse,

 and I’ve always told you what I thought.

 The Three Emperors**2**were the wisest of men,

 but where are they now? And loving his

 eight-hundred-year life, old P’eng-tsu**3**

 wanted to stay on here, but he too set out.

45Young and old die the same death. When it

 comes, the difference between sage and fool

 vanishes. Drinking every day may help you

 forget, but won’t it bring an early grave?

 And though good works may bring lasting

50joy, who will sing your praise? Listen—

 it’s never-ending analysis that wounds us.

 Why not circle away in the seasons, adrift

 on the Great Transformation, riding its vast

 swells without fear or delight? Once your

55time comes to an end, you end: not another

 moment lost to all those lonely worries.