

# *On Tao Yuanming's Life Choices from the Perspective of Heidegger*

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**Abstract:** Tao Yuanming was a man of letters and a refined scholar during the Wei and Jin Dynasties. His life took several turns, throughout which he held an official position, resigned from it, and finally lived in reclusion. Reality shaped Tao Yuanming's choices. His spiritual journey unfolded accordingly in stages, each decision reflecting deeper insights. As his thoughts on life evolved, so did the complexity of interpreting his actions. These shifts invite ongoing debate, revealing the multifaceted nature of Tao's philosophical growth. Fortunately, the pursuit of authenticity bound two minds across time. Tao Yuanming's choices, once puzzling, now resonate with Heidegger's insights. This unexpected link illuminates both thinkers' quests, offering a fresh lens to view Tao's life and decisions. In light of this, it is feasible to apply an interdisciplinary methodology to the analysis of Tao Yuanming's life choices. First, this essay will sort out the existential structure in Heidegger's philosophy by presenting the mood of beings through three links: care, anxiety, and death. Following that, a justification for its relevance in assessing Tao Yuanming's life situation will be provided. Next, in order to depict Tao Yuanming's real life in detail, this essay will integrate historical records with the author's literal creations and note down each choice made by the poet among a variety of life situations. Again, the previously indicated existential structure will be utilized to clarify the internal mechanism behind this association between the poet's choices and life situation. Finally, it can be concluded that Tao Yuanming's choices are a reflection of his continual exploration of the authentic meaning of life.

**Keywords:** Tao Yuanming, Heidegger, Existentialism Theory, Choice, Authenticity.

## 1. Introduction

Given that Tao Yuanming was a man who hovered between official and hidden, many of the prior studies have focused on the transition of his thoughts. As things stand, there has been much study about Tao Yuanming's motivations for serving as an officer, his resignation and reclusion, as well as comparisons between his ideas and those of Heidegger. But the thing is, on the one hand, many articles in modern times just simply acquiesce in Tao Yuanming's image as a hermit since the release of *Jingjie Zhengshi Lei* [1]. Since the middle of the 20th century, though, the image of him has been given new understandings. One such example is Okamura Shigeru's *Tao Yuanming Li Bai xin lun*, which describes Tao as "a character who is capriciously stubborn in his self-centered lifestyle and has a strong secular desire." [2] Such an interpretation still goes too far. In this research context, there is a lack of panoramic analysis on the image of Tao Yuanming. On the other hand, current works on

Heidegger and Tao Yuanming's comparative study rely overly on a thinking mode with a transcendental dimension. By way of example, Zhang Shiying's *Heidegger's Metaphysics: An Analysis of Tao Yuanming's Poetry* uses Heidegger's philosophical idea of "being-towards-death" to analyze Tao Yuanming's upbeat outlook on life and his lack of fear of death [3]. Nevertheless, the problem lies in the fact that the poet's concrete life situation is infrequently combined. In order to close these research gaps, this essay will employ an interdisciplinary research methodology, starting with Heidegger's existentialist philosophy and integrating it with Tao Yuanming's literary creation's writing background. It will then analyze the motivations and underlying causes of his decisions at each significant life-turning point, including his selection as an official, resignation, and reclusion.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1. Care-Taking Office

In Heidegger's view, Da-sein is a kind of being of being-in-the-world, and the basic structure of which manifests as "care" [4]. Such a thing refers to a sort of intimate "mood" that an individual may experience when he relates to the surrounding world, thereby revealing the essence of human existence. It is noteworthy that "mood" and "emotion" are not a single thing; while the latter indicates specific things, the former lacks actual referentiality. To put it another way, people always find themselves in an unexplainable mood, which identifies that Da-sein is always in "its thrownness and dependence on the world already disclosed with its being", hence representing a primordial connection between the self and the world [4]. This dynamic interplay shapes our world, as individuals and objects interact. Simultaneously, the world unfolds its own intricate web, linking Da-sein to all else in an ever-shifting balance of relationships [4].

"Care" also arises from such a connection. On the one hand, Da-sein "has to be its being" in which a certain existential structure is set by the world [4], making its existence controlled by an external. On the other hand, Da-sein tends to transcend its being, provided that it lives in the world concretely; by doing so, its determinate character will resolve in those things at hand as tools. Therefore, in such a conflict, people are prone to be in a mood of "care".

Due to the influence of this interdependent and inseparable situation, it is easy for people to mistake Da-sein for other similar innerworldly beings [5]. They become more vulnerable to be influenced by others when making the project, and aim to survive for the existence of others, rather than for the self. Under wrapping up in the public opinion, the essence of Da-sein is hence transcended by others, and the value of its life is transformed from an internal, individual existence to an external, public one.

Regarding Tao Yuanming in his youth, despite his innate character, he found himself ensnared by the world he lives in. The allure of bureaucratic life proved inescapable, forcing him to deviate from his authentic nature and embrace a career in officialdom. Before taking office, Tao Yuanming cultivated his land, savoring the tranquility where he lived. In a beautiful and harmonious natural environment, he "saw the trees shaded, birds' notes varied, gaining the joy from it." (见草木交荫, 时鸟变声, 亦复欢然有喜。) [6] It is thus clear that Tao Yuanming established a very close relationship with the countryside; as the poem goes, "There is no other preference for youth, only the nature of Qishan." (少无适俗韵, 性本爱丘山。) [6]

But there would be a day when Tao Yuanming had to leave his shelter haven behind because this was not the Land of Peach Blossoms, and the outside world had always encroached into his way of life. For Tao Yuanming, his age of 29 marked such a pivotal moment as he was pushed into bureaucracy due to a series of external factors.

On the one hand, Confucianism played a significant role in this regard. Since Sima's founding, the rulers still stood for "governing the world with Confucian ethical code" (以名教治天下) [7], despite

its philosophy appearing to be on the wane. Tao Yuanming was deeply influenced by it, as seen from his statement, "While young, I had social relation cold, and only indulged in six classics old." (少年罕人事, 游好在六经。)[6] Teachings at that time, rooted in the wisdom of Confucius and Mencius, emphasized a perfect combination of scholar pursuit and public service, embodying the ancient idea that true learning culminates in leadership roles; as a saying goes, "a man who excels in the study should follow an official career" (学而优则仕)[8]. In a social environment like this, reading helped individuals build up their own goals, and holding public office was a way to encounter them. Therefore, Tao Yuanming viewed his position as an official as both a significant way to live out personal values and a method of putting Confucianism into effect.

On the other hand, it was also related to the concept of family status at that time. According to the records of En Xin Biography in *Song Annals*, "Since the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the noble had dominated the lowly, and the difference between scholars and commoners was more discerning." [9] (魏晋以来, 以贵役贱。士庶之科, 较然有辨。) It followed that the concept of family status became ingrained during the Wei and Jin Dynasties, and everything in society was inseparable from it, which more or less affected Tao Yuanming's life choices [10]. In the poem *Instructions for My Son*, he narrated the deeds of various forebears who served as officials, and he singled out his great grandfather Tao Kan for special praise. The poet either praised his virtue of "not attached by success, not lost by prize" (功遂辞归, 临宠不忒。)[6], or marveled at his achievements of "setting an upright example, bringing great benefits to the people" (直方二台, 惠和千里。)[6]. As can be observed, the family factor brought a sense of pride and superiority to Tao Yuanming, which in turn inspired him to strive for success and restore the honor of the family in his youth [11]; as he wrote in his poem, "I still remember in my prime, I could be happy in sad time. Over the four seas I aimed high; spreading my wing I dreamed to fly." [6] (忆我少壮时, 无乐自欣豫。猛志逸四海, 骞翮思远翥。) Therefore, it seems sense for Tao Yuanming to accomplish this aim by being an official.

## 2.2. Anxiety-Resignation

Heidegger also posits that "care", a fundamental state of being, can trigger "anxiety" when people have some profound insights into the life situation where they exist. "In anxiety, Da-sein finds itself faced with nothingness of the possible impossibility of its existence," [4] Heidegger defined it in this way. Stated differently, it is a mood of understanding the nothingness of the existence of Da-sein.

The reason people would experience "anxiety" is that it is closely related to "fear", "both phenomena remain mostly undifferentiated, and we designate as anxiety what is really fear, and call fear what has the character of anxiety." [4] "Fear" always entails innerworldly beings with threat, while "anxiety" does not involve such definite objects, it always points to the overall life situation of Da-sein in the world instead, forming a sense of nameless horror. For the record, "fear and anxiety are not two parallel patterns of being, but two sides of the same state of being." [12] The "fear" of specific objects always points to "anxiety", while the grasp of "anxiety" in the whole can be reduced to "fear".

Since the entity that people "fear" lacks a specific direction, yet encompasses the entirety of the world, then "In anxiety, the things at hand in the surrounding world sink away, and so do innerworldly beings in general. The 'world' can offer nothing more, nor can the Dasein-with of others." [4] Thus, the world reveals its nothingness, leading people to struggle to find any meaning in their surroundings, which can create feelings of unease and contribute to a sense of desperation in life. As a result, people may feel thrown by the world, leading to a sense of introspection where they recognize their infinite possibilities as unique beings; but at the same time, many of them will also seek a homeland to retreat and shield themselves from the feeling of "uncanniness".

When Tao Yuanming began to access the political circle, the landscape had been rather disheartening. According to the records of Liu Mu Biography in *Song Annals*, "During that period, Jin Dynasty's court discipline was so lax that there was little oversight, allowing the aristocrats to abuse their power to bully the people who were impoverished and had nowhere to live." (时晋纲宽弛, 威禁不行, 盛族豪右, 负势陵纵, 小民穷蹙, 自立无所。) [9] The manifestation of this in political circle is the reckless use of talent. To be specific, the dedicated individual of integrity faced ongoing suspicions, while the deceitful sycophants were consistently rewarded with promotions. Tao Yuanming experienced being referred to as a "Xigou" in a sarcastic manner by aristocratic families and witnessed Xie Xuan's struggles with depression stemming from their suspicions [13]. As the poet expressed with feeling, "Zhong Fu shared his heartfelt words, yet Jiang Gong refused to heed reason." (仲父献诚言, 姜公乃见猜。) [6] Here, he expressed disappointment that the court undervalued talent and felt a sense of helplessness regarding the frequent struggles scholars experienced in the world of politics. During the Liu Song Dynasty, nothing had changed for the better. The imperial court responded to violence with more violence, eliminating rivals and dissenters. It is unfortunate that even Emperors Gong and An met a brutal end, and common scholars faced a similar fate. This prompted Tao Yuanming to express his sorrow, stating, "With clarity above, wickedness finds no refuge below." (明明上天鉴, 为恶不可履。) [6] Confronted with suspicion and threats to his safety, Tao Yuanming recognized the instability of his official career and contemplated signation due to his growing "fear".

Tao Yuanming's contemplation of "fear" led him to experience "anxiety", a spiritual crisis caused by the nothingness he saw in the world. This may have been a significant factor in his decision to resign. In his initial plan, he aimed to embody the Confucian idea of "making the whole world virtuous" by pursuing a role as an official, while also seeking to restore his family's former glory. Nonetheless, the admirable ideals that Tao Yuanming envisioned were ultimately burst by the realities of life. For one thing, the strictness of the family status system has hindered the advancement opportunities for junior scholars and negatively impacted their living conditions. For another thing, the Confucian doctrine of "benevolent governance" has unfortunately transformed into a means for those in power to maintain control: if obedient, it resembled being the paws of a tiger; if disobedient, it can lead to a fatal disaster [7]. There is an intense confliction between the absurd reality and his original intention, at which point everything sank away, and "The 'world' cannot offer anything more." [4] Tao Yuanming hence awakened to the truth from this, "Life is without base, floating like a breeze." (人生无根蒂, 飘如陌上尘。) [6] He realized that the meaning he initially found in family and society was essentially unfounded. Yet, this sense of detachment also offered him a sense of freedom for his soul. With no worldly worries, he experienced a feeling similar to birds returning to the forest and fish to the sea, inspiring him to seek out the meaning of life once more [4]. As a result, resignation emerged as the most viable option for Tao Yuanming, signifying his departure from worldly ideals and the start of his pursuit for an authentic spiritual homeland.

### 2.3. Death-Reclusion

According to Heidegger, the peak of "anxiety" is "death". However, this idea of "death" should not be confused with "the deceased", which refers to a biological thing [14]. There is a nuanced distinction between the two terms: "the deceased" refers to a state of "being-at-an-end", while "death" signifies "being-towards-the-end". This suggests that the former is a result, whereas the latter is a process. In a way, "death" is more primordial than "the deceased", as a man must first go to his death to be considered "the deceased". So "death" can be used to signify the original nature of life—a mode of "to be" that must be undertaken from the moment Da-sein exists [4].

Regarding the essence of death, it discloses itself through "the deceased". When a man becomes "the deceased", his existence perishes, and nothing will be there anymore. Thus, death is based on nothingness, which means that it has no foundation at all [14]. Death, as "the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein" [4], it will not provide the possibilities of achieving anything and will transform the project of people into impossibility. Yet, when reflecting on it from a different angle, the nothingness of death can also prove the "mineness" of death. On the one hand, in the context of nothingness, death is directly constructed as the impossibility of Da-sein itself, and only by entirely removing Da-sein as a possibility can death be fulfilled. This indicates that no one can take another's place in facing death, making it an inevitable reality each person must confront individually. During this process, people can get an understanding of the "mortality" that is fixed to the existence of themselves [14]. On the other hand, the possibility of death can render a man's project meaningless, diminish the reliability of other aspects of life, and ultimately, the only thing gained from death is the self [14]. It can then be concluded, "death is always essentially my own." [4]

The meaning of the existence of Da-sein hence unfolds in the understanding of death. Since others cannot deprive an individual's experience of death, external regulations become less effective, allowing individuals the freedom to engage with their own "being-towards-death". While in death, individuals find that their only gain is personal, indicating that there is no need to seek outside validation to acknowledge the meaning of existence. By reflecting on death, Da-sein can outstand itself from other inner-worldly beings, enabling a deeper connection with itself and the motivation to project more authentic life choices.

Tao's resignation, while setting aside personal gains and losses, exemplified a mindset of "no desire for fame and wealth" (不慕荣利) [6]. However, death remained a challenge for him to overcome. Tao Yuanming navigated a transitional period in which military unrest and famine plagued the country. Throughout his life, he encountered 11 significant epidemics and disasters, as well as 6 major wars, making widespread loss a common experience in society during that period [15]. As Tao Yuanming aged, he also experienced the sorrow of losing several close relatives both before and after his resignation from office: he initially experienced the loss of his sister, "Sister Cheng has gone for always, how should I cope with this loss! If consciousness survives death, our reunion still awaits. Alas, the sorrow overwhelms" (奈何程妹, 于此永已! 死如有知, 相见蒿里。呜呼哀哉!) [6]; followed by the loss of his brother, "The cup is still there, while the man is nowhere to be found. My little brother, why did you pass away and leave me alone!" (抚杯而言, 物久人脆, 奈何吾弟, 先我离世!) [6] As for the poet himself, he was tortured by the illness lasting for years, "In middle age, he was infected with malaria." (年在中身, 疾维痼疾。) [6] and "Since falling ill, his body has been slowly wasting." (疾患以来, 渐就衰损。) [6] All of these encounters had a profound effect on Tao Yuanming's views about death and shed light on why he chose to be a recluse.

To Tao Yuanming's understanding, everyone has a limit, and death is a natural part of life that we cannot escape; he stated straightly, "The universe expands endlessly, yet human existence flickers briefly—rarely surpassing a century." (宇宙一何悠, 人生少至百。) [6] He also mentioned the life after death, "Where is my soul fled far away? But shriveled forms in coffin stay." (魂气散何之, 枯形寄空木。) [6] "For gain and loss, I no more care; right or wrong is not my affair." (得失不复知, 是非安能觉。) [6] In his eyes, the ideas of the soul and the afterlife are not real, and everything will eventually fade into silence. When life comes to an end, the body wears out, and the spirit is extinguished, with no lasting or transcendent existence. So, it seems, "Life is a vision fair and short; all will vanish into the blue." (人生似幻化, 终当归空无。) [6] Tao Yuanming hence came to the insight that the external things cannot be relied upon, and what people truly hold onto is the transient time they experience life and death. For Tao Yuanming, who left his official position to return home,



the countryside was all that remained in his life. By fully embracing the joys of farming, reading, and drinking, he found a way to affirm the meaning of his existence.

The next question is, what pursuits are truly meaningful in such a short life? Tao Yuanming answered this in *Body, Shadow and Spirit*, "Wine may make you forget, not mend. Won't it make death precipitate?" (日醉或能忘, 将非促龄具?) "Doing good will gladden your mind. Who'll sing after your death your praise?" (立善常所欣, 谁当为汝誉?) [6] The enjoyment of material pleasures and the pursuit of fame and fortune will all come to an end with death, leaving a man with nothing behind. From this viewpoint, external things cannot provide people with lasting value; rather, they can cloud their genuine aspirations and contribute to anxiety regarding the notion that "Panta Rhei". Such being the case, it would be better to do so, "Do not think of things of such kind, but follow nature in future days. Playing with rising or ebbing tide, without pleasure and without fear!" (甚念伤吾生, 正宜委运去。纵浪大化中, 不喜亦不惧。) [6] Simply put, it is good for a man to follow his natural attributes, which, in philosophical terms, is connected to his true intention. Regarding the true intention of Tao Yuanming, was to appreciate the beauty of the countryside's trees, springs, and stones, a love he has developed since his youth. Therefore, it is a good option, "To venture out on my own when the timing is right, or to plant seeds in the ground while using a hoe." (怀良辰以孤往, 或植杖而耘耔。) [6] Considering he had been trapped by the worldly existence for several decades, and now, "Fields will be overgrown, why not return home?" (田园将芜, 胡不归?) [6]

### 3. Conclusion

To conclude, this essay explores the reasons, processes, and results of Tao Yuanming's life choices within the existential structure of Heidegger's theory. The above research suggests that Tao Yuanming's perspective on the meaning of life evolves due to various influences, including the historical context, his family background, and the challenges he encountered throughout his life. In his early years, Tao Yunaming cultivated a secular dream and embarked on the journey of becoming an official due to his "care" for external factors, such as societal norms and family status. However, because of his "fear" of dangers from the officialdom and the resulting "anxiety" about secular ideas, he chose to resign this position after then. Ultimately, by confronting death directly, Tao Yuanming recognized that the true meaning of life comes from within. This understanding led him to embrace a more secluded lifestyle, allowing him to reconnect with his authentic self.

In essence, exploring Tao Yuanming's decisions in light of Heidegger's philosophical ideas reflects his pursuit of "authenticity". The academic value of doing so lies in two important aspects. On the one hand, it is to broaden the depth and breadth of Tao studies. This essay seeks to systematically examine the essence of Tao Yuanming's philosophy through the lens of Heidegger's thought, enriching it with deeper humanistic meanings; simultaneously, it also takes into account the poet's emotional experiences, marking several key milestones in Tao Yuanming's life, and offering a nuanced look at how it takes turns. On the other hand, it is to present a more detailed and vibrant image of Tao Yuanming. This study of Tao Yuanming's thoughts involves both close reading and macro analysis, without being confined to a particular work from a certain period, but rather focusing on the essence of each choice and the changing relationships between them, thus truly entering the artistic and spiritual world of Tao Yuanming's poetry.

As academic perspectives expand, interdisciplinary comparison is emerging as a significant method for Tao studies, since analyzing Tao Yuanming's literary work through the lenses of Western philosophy and literary theory can offer fresh insights. This article focuses on constructing an existentialist framework for Tao Yuanming's work based on Heidegger's perspective. However, due to time limitations, a comprehensive textual interpretation of his life circumstances is still needed.

Future research should integrate close reading to more effectively explore the underlying factors influencing his life situation.

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