A Detailed Study of "Peach Blossom Spring"

A DETAILED STUDY OF "PEACH BLOSSOM SPRING" 1

Mark H. F. Tang

Although "Peach Blossom Spring" ("Tao Hua Yuan Chi"), by Tao Yuan-ming (372-427 A.D.), is a sketch, it is worth reading intensively. At the beginning, we find an intense contrast between the first two Chinese sentences: "In the reign of Tai Yuan (326-397 A.D.) of the Tsin Dynasty (265-420 A.D.), there lived in Wuling, a small town in Hunan Province, a man whose profession was fish-catching." (晉太原中，武陵人捕魚爲業) We know "the reign of Tai Yuan" marks an epoch of great disorder, because, in our history, the age of Wei (220-265 A.D.), Tsin, and the Southern and Northern Dynasties (221-589 A.D.) was a long period of upheaval and commotion. That is why when reading "In the reign of Tai Yuan", we naturally react as we do when somebody mentions "the early part of 1940", thinking of the historical facts about that period and perceiving intuitively the spirit of history expressed by these four Chinese characters "晉太原中". But subsequently we read "there lived in Wuling a man whose profession was fish-catching", which reveals a view peaceful and tranquil. The implication of fisherman or fish-catching to the Chinese mind always discloses such a sentiment and atmosphere. That is why I feel the first two Chinese sentences—the first one suggesting a great disorder and the second one revealing an atmosphere of leisure and composure—constitute a strong contrast. The former indicates a great epoch, whereas the latter reveals what a mere nobody was doing in his small world. In other words, Tao Yuan-ming just portrays against that chaotic background a small world, which was so different as contrasted with that great epoch. The whole thematical context of "Peach Blossom Spring" is built in the contrast between a great but chaotic epoch and a small but peaceful world. This has been revealed in the first two sentences of the sketch.

In our Chinese mind, the implication of fish-catching is as I have mentioned above; but to the Westerners, fish emerge as the symbol of life, to catch fish is, therefore, to catch life. If we add this symbol held by the Westerners to our traditional expression, the meaning of "fish-catching" will be more plenteous and abundant. Thus we may say "the fisherman of Wuling" is a man seeking for life. This implies that what that fisherman had done forms a sharp antithesis to that great but life-devastating epoch—"fleeing from the confusion of the Ch'in Dynasty (221-207 B.C.)" (避秦時亂), of which the writer has made clear in the latter part of the
sketch. That fisherman's small world was full of eager pursuit of life, while in that great epoch, we find nothing but denial to life. The implication that fish-catching symbolizes the pursuit of life is found in the following sentence: "(The fisherman) followed the course of the stream", (沿溪行) for "stream" also signifies "life"; especially when the fisherman was rowing upstream for exploring the source of the stream. Though Tao Yuan-ming did not say the fisherman was rowing against the stream, it must be pointed out in this connection that, from the title "Peach Blossom Spring" and the sentence "The grove of blossoming peach trees ended at a spring", (桃盡水源) it is almost certain that the fisherman was then rowing against the stream.

"Peach Blossom Spring" must be looked upon as a "Utopia", which to Tao Yuan-ming is his Arcadia. That will surely hurt the taste of this sketch if we cannot interpret the overtones but insist that there certainly is such a place somewhere in the world called "Peach Blossom Spring"; and to make matters worse, many of the episodes will appear unreasonable. We should, therefore, consider "Peach Blossom Spring" as a Utopia, an Arcadia, or even an Elysium. Since "Peach Blossom Spring" stands for a spiritual place, so it should be isolated from that of the practical. In western literature, the way of describing an isolated place is usually divided into two aspects: The one is a story told by an old mariner who has travelled many places, such as Sir Thomas More's "Utopia"; and the other is a dream, such as Dante's "Divine Comedy". The way of isolation that Tao Yuan-ming uses here is quite natural. He just says, "The fisherman became unconscious of the distance he had rowed". (忘路之遠近) This is Tao Yuan-ming's sleight of ignoring real distance. Had Tao Yuan-ming clearly stated how long the distance was, then "Peach Blossom Spring" would have been a real region somewhere in the world. But he only mentioned "(The fisherman) became unconscious of the distance he had rowed", so "Peach Blossom Spring" might well be so near as if it were under your nose, but, in reality, it is as far away as if it were the castle in the air.

It seems incredible that a fisherman forgot how far he had rowed when he was catching fish along a stream. This is as illogical as a taximan who forgets how many miles he has driven. So I may venture to assert that at that time the fisherman must have been in a strange mood or enchanted by a certain mystical power; otherwise he wouldn't have been unconscious of the distance he had rowed. This kind of queer mental state is necessary because he had to pass a period of unconsciousness before entering a transcendent world; in other words, an ideal world. Generally speaking, the area where a fisherman often fishes and the distance he usually
travels must all be very familiar to him. Now that Tao Yuan-ming says the fisherman arrived at a district of not being conscious of the distance, we know the fisherman must have come upon a place where he had never set foot in. This indicates the fisherman was intruding into a new realm of consciousness (意識境界), so different from what he had usually seen and felt.

In "He (the fisherman) suddenly came upon a grove of peach trees in full bloom", (忽逢桃花林) the adverb "suddenly" (忽) not only correlates with, but also enhances the association of, ".....became unconscious of the distance he (the fisherman) had rowed". We know Tao Yuan-ming was deeply influenced by Buddhism and Taoism, he must have been very conversant with such notions as "sudden realization" (頓悟), "intuition" (直覺), and "anti-knowledge" (反知識); and "suddenly came upon" (忽逢) seems to be the crystallization of those notions. We need not try rationally to find the exact location of "Peach Blossom Spring", because, as verified by latter statements--"The prefect of the county immediately sent off men with him (the fisherman) in search of the unknown region", (太守即遣人随其往) and "Liu Tzu-chi's vain attempt", (劉子騫之尋訪) --this is but a logical inference. To enter such a region, or, as we may better say, "a fairyland", the shortest cut might be through "sudden realization" and "intuition". Those who can perceive anything by "sudden realization" and "intuition" must be those who are pure and innocent as Tao Yuan-ming or that fisherman. Because the fisherman was a man of Nature, so he could "suddenly come upon" the grove of peach trees in full bloom; whereas the prefect and Liu Tzu-chi were both acting intentionally, that's why, on the contrary, they could not find it. As for the prefect and Liu Tzu-chi, I'd like to say a few words further about them. The prefect was an official, that implies he was one of those who had caused that epoch of great disorder, so his being unable to find Peach Blossom Spring is quite natural. But as for Liu Tzu-chi, he was a noble and virtuous scholar (高士也), why should he be so luckless as to be unable to carry out his plan? Before explaining this, let's dwell for a moment on Liu Tzu-chi's motive first:

Liu Tzu-chi of Nanyang, a descendant of a ranking official Liu Tan, was so simple, modest, ascetic, and frugal when young that people paid no attention to him. He was fond of travelling to enjoy the sight of mountains and rivers, hoping that he could escape worldly worries and troubles. Once while gathering medicinal herbs in Mt. Hen, he went astray. There in mountains he found on
the opposite bank of a stream two stone granaries, one closed and the other open. But the stream was too wide and deep for him to cross, he was obliged to give up. After asking a woodcutter, he finally found his way home. It was said those granaries were stored with various kinds of panaceas, elixirs, magical prescriptions, and what not. Though he tried many times afterwards, he was at a loss to know its whereabouts.  

The quotation above is worth pondering: We know Liu Tzu-chi's experience seems similar with that of the fisherman, but he went astray and just saw two granaries across a stream, which was too wide and deep to cross, so he could not but look with a sigh at those treasures. This is only because he was not so lucky as that fisherman. Though "he tried many times afterwards", his motive was by no means pure and innocent, for he had heard "the granaries were in store of various kinds of panaceas, elixirs, magical prescriptions, and what not". Thus it is seen that Liu Tzu-chi was no more than a vulgarian. It is owing to these reasons, I think, that Tao Yuan-ming purposely says, "Liu Tzu-chi tried in vain for seeking Peach Blossom Spring". (未果) As for "While in search, he fell sick and soon died", (寻病终) I shall talk about it later.

The sentence "There was not a tree of any other kind in sight", (中无雜樹) might be the major cause of "The fisherman feeling quite surprised". (漁人甚異之) Considering the actual situation, how can it be possible that, in a wilderness, there was not a tree of any other kind among a grove of peach trees occupying an area of several hundred paces? But in a fairyland, it really is possible. Until now, Tao Yuan-ming has given us three signals--;"....became unconscious of the distance he (the fisherman) had rowed," "....suddenly came upon a grove of peach trees in full bloom," and "not a tree of any other kind in sight, "--suggesting that we are gradually leaving the world of mortals with the fisherman for the fairyland. With these signals, we shall soon arrive at Peach Blossom Spring. The sentence "(The fisherman) rowed on, wanting to get to the limit of that lovely grove" (欲窮其林) indicates that this man was really a pursuer. So he should never be looked upon as any ordinary fisherman, because factually no fisherman will be so curious as to give up his fishing to explore a region that is completely unfamiliar to him. He was fabricated by Tao Yuan-ming, or, as we might rather say, was the incarnation of Tao Yuan-ming himself; otherwise he could never be so persistent. He finally found that: "The grove ended at a spring".
Speaking of order, this, I think, may be the main cause of Peach Blossom Spring's being Peach Blossom Spring. All such sentences--"The houses and huts were all neatly arranged," "There were fertile paddy-fields and beautiful ponds," "Communication was facilitated by pathways of different widths leading everywhere," "The crowing of roosters and the barking of dogs were heard between communities," and "People were coming and going and working in the fields," --tell us nothing but that it was a place of perfect order. "Order" implies peace and comfort, of which the outside world was in deficiency. It was indeed this orderly society that brought about mental calmness; that's why "Old people and youngsters alike appeared happy and contented".

In our present age when the term "generation gap" is prevalent everywhere, these few Chinese characters do make us heartfully rapturous. It may well be a myth or a TV play in present day to describe the white-haired and the young playing merrily together; but in an ideal society, there must not be any misunderstanding or gap between two or among three generations. In other words, only when a group of people can fully communicate, and get happily along, with one another, will they be able to gather together to form a contented and harmonious society. The first thing that causes a chaotic society lies in the communication--substantial and spiritual--among individuals being cut asunder, then people will act as Matthew Arnold wrote:

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Sweep with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant-armies clash by night.

Some may feel dissatisfied with Tao Yuan-ming for his not mentioning much about what it really was in Peach Blossom Spring. But, in my opinion, though he did not describe much about his Arcadia, he has fully presented before us the essence of a Utopia--living peacefully and comfortably in order. Those Utopias, as described in western literature as Plato's "Republica" and Sir Thomas More's "Utopia", are all places of proper order. Living in such a society, people will naturally feel completely safe from any danger. But how about the big world outside: According to "The Circumstantial Evidences of Peach Blossom Spring" (桃花源記旁證), by Chen Yin-chueh (陳寅恪), "In the declining years of the Earlier Tsin Dynasty (265-316 A.D.), the country was infested with robbers, bandits, and northern and southern barbarian invaders...... People assembled in castles and strongholds, for fear of being attacked by barbarian tribes and bandits."
Chen provided wide supporting materials to explain the prevalence of people's assemblage in castles and strongholds. This proves that, like any Utopia, Peach Blossom Spring constituted a reverse side to social confusion and a hope for order and reason, and those castles and strongholds, like Peach Blossom Spring, stood for places of safety. As regards the outward appearance, those castles and strongholds were the embodiment of Freud's theory. Castles and strongholds may sometimes be attacked and conquered, but Tao Yuan-ming's Peach Blossom Spring was located at a region of "becoming unconscious of the distance", so it had been detached completely from the world of mortals and no weapon could reach there. In the same treatise, Chen also conjectured, "The Ch'in from which the inhabitants there fled was not the one ruled by Ch'in Shih Huang (秦始皇, 246-214 B.C.) but the one by Fu Chien (符堅, 351-394 A.D.) 5  As for this, there has not been any agreement of opinion since the Sung Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.). 6  If it is really so, we know that superficially Tao Yuan-ming said it was during the time of Ch'in Shih Huang but, in reality, he was just offering a criticism on contemporary society.

It remains controversial, of course, if we discuss the matter on its merits whether Tao Yuan-ming purposely made the above supposition. But what is indisputable is the words written by Tao Yuan-ming himself, "They said their ancestors had sought refuge for fleeing from the tribulation of the Ch'in Dynasty......They did not know anything of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-219 A.D.), to say nothing of its successors the Wei and the Tsin." (自云先世避秦時亂......無論魏晉) Since Tao Yuan-ming did write so, I cannot but explain it at its face value. Doing so, I found it more meaningful than what Chen Yin-chueh had deduced. First of all, if it was the Ch'in ruled by Fu Chien, then it could not be long after they fled into Peach Blossom Spring, nor could they be "cut off from the outside world" (遠與外人間隔) to form an ideal society. Just as the distance was unconscious to the fisherman, so was the time, which was the longer the better; otherwise Peach Blossom Spring could never be an Arcadia, which was absolutely different from the secular world. Secondly, the sentence "They did not know anything of the Han Dynasty, to say nothing of its successors the Wei and the Tsin" may be the expression of Tao Yuan-ming's viewpoint on Buddhism and Taoism, which have directly denied the mundane world. He purposely hypothesized the ignorance of the Peach Blossom Spring inhabitants not knowing the successive dynasties after Ch'in for denying the existence of any dynasty; The rises and falls of Empires down through the ages remain nothing more than the vicissitudes of fortune.
Although the inhabitants there warned the fisherman "not to tell the people outside what he had seen," (不足與外人道也) he still "told of" his visit. But after all what does this imply? Firstly, if the fisherman kept it in the dark, how could people know there "was" such a place somewhere in the world? In other words, there certainly was a Peach Blossom Spring in Tao Yuan-ming's mind. If he did not let it be known to the world through that fisherman's mouth but kept it forever in his mind, how could his dream be beneficial to his society? Although Tao Yuan-Ming was deeply absorbed in Buddhist and Taoist canons, at least one third of his mind was in favor of Confucianism. That's why he still showed a certain degree of intervention and participation in the society in which he lived. Therefore Peach Blossom Spring serves not only as a social satire but as a suggestion of an ideal community. Secondly, after visiting Peach Blossom Spring, the fisherman then returned to the human world. Like many other human beings in Chinese and western myths, he had to visit the Paradise or the Hell (especially the latter), then could he bring back the information he had picked up there to enlighten the world of mortals. This is because the information in the mundane world is quite limited, we can only make it complete and perspicuous by the help of that gained from Paradise and Hell. Once returned, those Paradise or Hell visitors could not restrain themselves from telling anyone they met what they experienced. Just like Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" who told anyone he met his horrible encounters on the sea, the fisherman, upon arriving home, went immediately to the prefect to report what he had discovered. Maybe it was out of the similar impulse that the fisherman wanted to share the information, of which the human world was deficient. Thirdly, we must know, though the inhabitants there warned him "not to tell the people outside what he had seen", the fisherman did not keep the secret. Because he did not promise he would not tell anybody of what he had experienced, he could not be looked upon as guilty of disclosing the secret. Since he was innocent, and furthermore he made marks here and there on his way back, this indicated he intended to revisit this fairyland with many others. Could it be that the fisherman's seeking audience of the prefect implies that he tried to enlighten the official with the information he picked up from Peach Blossom Spring? Then we read: "They went astray and could not retrack the course." (迷途，不復得路) Could it be that this is just a satire on the people of the world outside who had got lost, without knowing what they were in pursuit of? Noble and virtuous as Liu Tzu-chi was, even he could not enter Peach Blossom Spring, either. But the question is: Why should Tao Yuan-ming, in a fabled story, mention a real person—Liu Tzu-chi? ...
opinion, this can be made clear in three aspects: Firstly, he did so for nothing but the reliability of his story; just as what he had done at the beginning by fixing the time and place of his story in "the reign of Tai Yuan" and "Wuling". Secondly, he purposely set those vividly described details on an invented story in our actual world, hoping that people of that time might be aware that what was actual might also be idealized. Thirdly, Liu Tzu-chi's vain attempt and death might constitute a revelation that there certainly was such a place somewhere in the world; and that the one who longed for it (no matter how unqualified be he might) died soon, thus "none tried to search for the region since then". (後逐無聞) Could it be that Liu Tzu-chi's death reveals that the one who had been in pursuit of his ideal finally died, so that the mass of people could not but suffer all hardships in the confusion of the age? Liu Tzu-chi's death may also symbolize the dispirited mood of the mass of people of that time. If so, the troubled condition during the reign of Tai Yuan is made conspicuous by contrast.

Although Tao Yuan-ming ended his story in "None tried to search for the region since then", this is, it seems to me, his reverse suggestion: If we keep on reading his "Peach Blossom Spring", we shall surely someday make the Peach Blossom Spring in our mind come true.

1. The original and English translations of "Peach Blossom Spring":

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THE PEACH-BLOSSOM FOUNTAIN

During the reign of Tai-Yuan of Tsin Dynasty, a certain fisherman of Wu-lung, who had followed up one of the river branches without taking note whither he was going, came suddenly upon a grove of peach-trees in full bloom, extending some distance on each bank, with not a tree of any other kind in sight. The beauty of the scene and the exquisite perfume of the flowers filled the heart of the fisherman with surprise, as he proceeded onwards, anxious to reach the limit of this lovely grove. He found that the peach trees ended where the water began, at the foot of a hill; and there he espied what seemed to be a cave with light issuing from it. So he made fast his boat, and crept in through a narrow entrance, which shortly ushered him into a new world of level country, of fine houses, of rich fields, of fine pools, and of luxuriance of mulberry and bamboo. Highways of traffic ran north and south; sounds of crowing cocks and barking dogs were heard around; the dress of the people who passed along or were at work in the fields was of a strange cut; while young and old alike appeared to be contented and happy.

One of the inhabitants, catching sight of the fisherman, was greatly astonished; but, after learning whence he came, insisted on carrying him home, and killed a chicken and placed some wine before him. Before long, all the people of the place had turned out to see the visitor, and they informed him that their ancestors had sought refuge here, with their wives and families, from the troublous times of the house of Chin, adding that they had thus become finally cut off from the rest of the human race. They then enquired about the politics of the day, ignorant of the establishment of Han dynasty, and of course of the later dynasties which had succeeded it. And when the fisherman told them the story, they grieved over the vicissitudes of human affair.

Each in turn invited the fisherman to his home and entertained him hospitably, until at length the latter prepared to take his leave. "It will not be worth while to talk about what you have seen to the outside world," said the people of the place to the fisherman, as he bade them farewell and returned to his boat, making mental notes of his route as he proceeded on his homeward voyage.

When he reached home, he at once went and reported what he had seen to the Governor of the district, and the Governor sent off men with him to seek, by the aid of the fisherman's notes, to discover this unknown region. But he was never able to find it again. Subsequently, another attempt to pierce the mystery was planned by a famous
scholar named Liu Tse-kee, but the plan was not carried out. Liu soon died, and from that time on no further attempts to locate the place were made. by Herbert A. Giles

T'ao Ch'ien
[T'ao hua yüan chi]
Peach Blossom Spring

During the reign-period T'ai yuan [326-97] of the Chin dynasty there lived in Wu-ling a certain fisherman. One day, as he followed the course of a stream, he became unconscious of the distance he had travelled. All at once he came upon a grove of blossoming peach trees which lined either bank for hundreds of paces. No tree of any other kind stood amongst them, but there were fragrant flowers, delicate and lovely to the eye, and the air was filled with drifting peachbloom.

The fisherman, maryelling, passed on to discover where the grove would end. It ended at a spring; and then there came a hill. In the side of the hill was a small opening which seemed to promise a gleam of light. The fisherman left his boat and entered the opening. It was almost too cramped at first to afford him passage; but when he had taken a few dozen steps he emerged into the open light of day. He faced a spread of level land. Imposing buildings stood among rich fields and pleasant ponds all set with mulberry and willow. Linking paths led everywhere, and the fowls and dogs of one farm could be heard from the next. People were coming and going and working in the fields. Both the men and the women dressed in exactly the same manner as people outside; white-haired elders and tufted children alike were cheerful and contented.

Some, noticing the fisherman, started in great surprise and asked him where he had come from. He told them his story. They then invited him to their home, where they set out wine and killed chickens for a feast. When news of his coming spread through the village everyone came in to question him. For their part they told how their forefathers, fleeing from the troubles of the age of Ch'in, had come with their wives and neighbours to this isolated place, never to leave it. From that time on they had been cut off from the outside world. They asked what age was this; they had never even heard of the Han, let alone its successors the Wei and the Chin. The fisherman answered each of their questions in full, and they sighed and wondered at what he had to tell. The rest all invited him to their homes in turn, and in each house food and wine were set before him. It was only after a stay of several days that he took his leave.
"Do not speak of us to the people outside," they said. But when he had regained his boat and was retracing his original route, he marked it at point after point; and on reaching the prefecture he sought audience of the prefect and told him of all these things. The prefect immediately despatched officers to go back with the fisherman. He hunted for the marks he had made, but grew confused and never found the way again.

The learned and virtuous hermit Liu Tzu-chi heard the story and went off elated to find the place. But he had no success, and died at length of a sickness. Since that time there have been no further "seekers of the ford."

-Translated by Cyril Birch-

In the reign of T'ai Yüan of the Tsin Dynasty, there was a professional fisherman of Wuling who walked along a creek and had forgotten the distance he had covered. All of a sudden he was confronted with a forest of plum blossom trees. On both sides of the stream for a distance of several hundred paces there was no other tree. The grass underneath was beautiful and fresh and the fallen petals were profuse and beautiful. Wondering at this, the fisherman again resumed his walk, wanting to get to the limit of this forest. Outside of the fringe of the forest there was the fountain of the creek by which there was a mountain. In the mountain-side there was a little opening through which light seemed to be seen. He then left his boat and went through the opening which was so narrow that it would admit only a single person. After walking several tens of paces the vista began to open up brightly. The land was expansive and flat and the houses and huts neatly arranged. There were good farms, beautiful ponds, bambooos and mulberry trees. Communication was facilitated by pathways of different widths and the crowing of roosters and the barking of dogs were easily heard between communities. The style of clothing worn by men and women going about and doing farm work were all like people outside. Old people and youngsters felt naturally happy and satisfied. As they saw the fisherman they were greatly surprised and asked him where he was from and when he had answered their questions in full he was invited to go home where wine was prepared and chickens were cooked and served.

Other people in the village having heard of this man all came to visit with their questions. These people said that their progenitors, fleeing from the confusion of the Ch'in Dynasty, had come with their wives, children and fellow townsmen to this exclusive place and had never
left it again. That's why they had been isolated from the outside world. Asking what dynasty was reigning, they knew nothing of the Han, leave alone the Wei and the Jin. The fisherman told them one item after another and they responded with sighs to what they heard. Other people also invited him to visit their homes by turn and they all treated him to wine and dinner. After a stay of several days he took his leave whereupon the people urged him not to tell outsiders about his visit. After coming out he found his boat and retraced his directions, leaving marks here and there. When he arrived at the county seat he reported thus and so to the prefect. The prefect immediately dispatched people to follow him in search of the marks he had left, but in the search they were confused and unable to retrack the course. Liu Tzu-chi was a scholar of extremely high quality who, having heard of this, happily decided to go himself in search. Before he left he died of an illness. Thereafter, there was none who asked about the place.

by Chen Shou-yi (陳受頤)

2. See 中華四部備要本卷九十四頁三：董文書局「晉書三」pp.2447-2448：「劉騫之，字子騫，南陽人，光祿大夫恥之族也。騫之少尚質素，虛退寡欲，不修儀操，人莫知之。好游山澤，志存逃逸。嘗採藥至衡山，深入忘返，見有一漠水，水南有二石樹，一圍閉，一圍開。水深廣，不得過，欲還失道，遇伐弓人，問徑，僅得還家。或說其中皆仙靈方藥諸雜物。騫之欲更尋索，終不復知處也。」

3. See the last lines of his "Dover Beach".

4. See 陳寅恪「桃花源記旁證」(「陶淵明研究資料彙編」，pp.338-347)：「西晉末年，戎狄盜賊並起，屯聚堡塲，據險自守，以避戎狄寇盜之難。」

5. Ibid., 「所避之秦乃符秦、而非羸秦。」

6. See 陳益壽：「陶淵明的政治立場與政治理想」（國立台灣大學文學叢刊）p.79。

7. See his "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner".