

# Peach Blossom Spring versus Utopia

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T'ao Yuan-ming (陶淵明, 365-427), the greatest poet of Six Dynasties China, is said to have composed his famous poem and prose, the "Peach Blossom Spring" (T'ao-hua-yuan, 桃花源詩并記), soon after his return to his homeland at the foot of Mount Lu in 405, at the age of forty. The poet had served for more than ten years as vice governor during the political and military turmoil of the Eastern Ch'in Dynasty, but realizing that he was not suited to a worldly career, he resigned and hurried back to his native village, as it is stated in his series of poems, *Returning to the Fields* (歸園田居).<sup>1</sup>

No further information is given about the historical and literary origin of his work, which is composed of two separate parts dealing with the same subject of the "Peach Blossom Spring." One is written in the form of a narrative, and the other in verse displaying a more mystical tone. Some poets in later dynasties regarded the piece as an initiation to Taoistic exercise; other poets and scholars believed that T'ao Yuan-ming was giving an account of an incident that actually occurred to a member of a minority race at the time of the Ch'in Dynasty. A poet of the late Ming, Yuen Chung-lang (袁中郎, 1568-1610), even took the trouble to visit and explore the site of the story in Hunan Province.

An English translation of the "Peach Blossom Spring" in prose follows:

During the T'ai-yuan period of the Chin dynasty a fisherman of Wuling once rowed upstream, unmindful of the distance he had gone, when he suddenly came to a grove of peach trees in bloom. For several hundred paces on both banks of the stream there was no other kind of tree. The wild flowers growing under them were fresh and lovely, and fallen petals covered the ground—it made a great impression on the fisherman. He went on for a way with the idea of finding out how far the grove extended. It came to an end at the foot of a mountain whence issued the spring that supplied the stream. There was a small opening in the mountain and it seemed as though light was coming through it. The fisherman left his boat and entered the cave, which at first was extremely narrow, barely admitting his body; after a few dozen steps it suddenly opened out, onto a broad and level plain where well-built houses were surrounded by

rich fields and pretty ponds. Mulberry, bamboo and other trees and plants grew there, and criss-cross paths skirted the fields. The sounds of cocks crowing and dogs barking could be heard from one courtyard to the next. Men and women were coming and going about their work in the fields. The clothes they wore were like those of ordinary people. Old men and boys were carefree and happy.

When they caught sight of the fisherman, they asked in surprise how he had got there. The fisherman told the whole story, and was invited to go to their house, where he was served wine while they killed a chicken for a feast. When the other villagers heard about the fisherman's arrival they all came to pay him a visit. They told him that their ancestors had fled the disorders of Ch'in times and, having taken refuge here with wives and children and neighbors, had never ventured out again; consequently they had lost all contact with the outside world. They asked what the present ruling dynasty was, for they had never heard of the Han, let alone the Wei and the Chin. They sighed unhappily as the fisherman enumerated the dynasties one by one and recounted the vicissitudes of each. The visitors all asked him to come to their houses in turn, and at every house he had wine and food. He stayed several days. As he was about to go away, the people said, 'There's no need to mention our existence to outsiders.'

After the fisherman had gone out and recovered his boat, he carefully marked the route. On reaching the city, he reported what he had found to the magistrate, who at once sent a man to follow him back to the place. They proceeded according to the marks he had made, but went astray and were unable to find the cave again.

A high-minded gentleman of Nan-yang named Liu Tzu-chi heard the story and happily made preparations to go there, but before he could leave he fell sick and died. Since then there has been no one interested in trying to find such a place.

(Translation by James R. Hightower)<sup>2</sup>

Because of its strong appeal to the imagination, this short masterpiece by T'ao Yuan-ming has never ceased to fascinate generations of poets, novelists and artists of East Asia, not only of China but also in Korea and Japan. It has inspired them to interpret in their own way this dream of an ideal place, of a small world of rural peace to be discovered beyond the boundaries of valleys and mountains. Even if we limit ourselves to Japan, the names of T'ao-hua-yuan in poetry and art are innumerable, ranging from court poets of the eighth century to cartoonists and singer-songwriters of the late twentieth century. One may safely assume that this ensemble of prose and verse of the early fifth century gave birth to a poetic *topos*, a configuration of poetic motifs, of a *locus amoenus*, a place of amenity, in East Asian

literature and art. After carefully reading T'ao Yuan-ming and other poets of different ages and different nationalities, one may generalize that the *topos* of the Peach Blossom Spring consists of the following factors, which I will examine by contrasting them with elements of the modern Western Utopia. I am attempting this contrast since the Peach Blossom Spring has been often mistakenly called an "Oriental Utopia" by some Japanese scholars of Chinese literature.

### 1) Approach to the place

In Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), the island of Utopia is located somewhere in the equatorial seas. The navigator Raphael Hythlodæus, or Raphael Nonsense, reached it by boat without experiencing any difficulty or danger, and stayed there for five years, after having quitted the last expedition crew of Amerigo Vespucci. In *The City of Sun* (*La città del sole*, 1602) by Tommaso Campanella, the protagonist, a Genoese navigation officer, encountered a party of men and women bearing arms when he was venturing on foot through a great plain on an island situated on the equator, and was taken with them to the City of Sun which stood on a hill. In these political treatises of utopia, the access to the ideal place is generally touched upon very lightly with just three or four lines of description. In the "Peach Blossom Spring", on the contrary, the approach to the hidden place is described in greater length, occupying almost one third of the entire prose with more sense of surprise and mystery. The meandering and narrowing approach plays a crucial role in the *topos* of the Peach Blossom Spring. In many cases it is a mountain path or a river which the protagonist believes to know which disorients him and leads him at the end to an unexpected wonderland. In the *Tale of the Tea God* (茶神物語) of Ueda Akinari (上田秋成, 1734-1809) an itinerant monk climbs up a dangerous path on a warm spring day, and it is his thirst which brings about for him an encounter with a strange old man who turns out later to be a Spirit of Tea. A poet-like young man, on his daily walk, wanders into wooded hills in *The House of a Spaniel* (西班牙犬の家, 1916) by Sato Haruo (佐藤春夫, 1892-1964), guided only by his dog, on one warm and hazy spring afternoon, and quite similar to the wanderer of Edgar Allan Poe's *Landor's Cottage* (1849), he discovers a small, handsome, half-western-style cottage.

Instead of bold seafaring discoverers of equatorial utopia, in the narrative of T'ao Yuan-ming it is a very humble fisherman of the locality of Wuling, a hilly area to the west of the Dongting Lake, who comes out of his usual trail and enters into an unknown stream. Why a fisherman, and not a farmer or a hunter? Probably because a fisherman has more mobility as well as greater independence than a farmer, a teacher or a government official. A fisherman also has richer poetic connotations in

traditional Chinese literature and art than a hunter or even a herb-gatherer. Then why did the fisherman “forget” how far he rowed upstream that morning? T’ao Yuan-ming relates this fact in only five Chinese characters and gives no explanation. But one can easily imagine it was because his haul of fish was so good that morning that he was totally absorbed in his job, like in the ancient folktale of a Japanese fisherman, Urashima Taro, or simply because the day was so warm and so hazy that he was overcome with drowsiness for a short while. This forgetfulness—the lapse of daily consciousness for even a moment—is an indispensable factor to enter the Peach Blossom Spring.

Awakened from a brief fading of his consciousness, the fisherman is stunned by an unexpected view of groves of peach trees in full bloom on both banks of the valley stream he had rowed up. Never having seen nor heard of such luxurious flowering peach trees before, he is now aware that he has gone beyond the territory of his daily work. Yet a fisherman is a layman, not a poet or a Taoist scholar. Overwhelmed and intrigued by the blooming scenery, he goes on rowing to see how far it extends and finally reaches the headspring of the stream where he faces a mountain. One may also ask why the valley is adorned with peach trees in bloom instead of Chinese plum trees or bamboo groves. The peach tree, together with its flowers and its fruits, was full of mythological (西王母, Fairy Mother Queen of the Kunlun Mountains) and poetical (「桃夭」, “A Young Peach-like Beauty”, *The Book of Songs*) connotations in China, no less than the Chinese plum tree or bamboo. Moreover, an old and long-lasting Chinese folk belief also bestowed it with a special power of expelling evil spirits. Above all, perhaps, it was one of the favorite trees of Tao Yuan-ming himself. The first poem in his *Returning to the Fields* praises his humble dwelling in the countryside, where he composed his “Peach Blossom Spring:”

Elms and willows cluster by the eaves:

Peach trees and plum trees grow before the hall.

(Tr. Arthur Waley)<sup>3</sup>

A valley traditionally has an apparent erotic symbolism, especially when it is adorned with peach trees in bloom on its two banks. Laotzu, T’ao Yuan-ming’s favorite philosopher together with Chungtzu, in VI of his book, compares the Goddess of the Valley to a great female sexual organ endowed with endless power of procreation. In the “Peach Blossom Spring” it is all the more erotic because at the end of the valley stream there was a small mouth of a cave open on the side of the mountain. As Gaston Bachelard says, if the cave were totally pitch-black, one would be too scared to enter it, while if it was straight and short enough to show the other side at its exit, few people would be tempted to venture into it.<sup>4</sup> In the “Peach Blossom Spring” the poet says that “it seemed as though light was coming through it”. No

one can resist the temptation of this dimly lit and intriguing cave: the fisherman squeezed his body into it.

The *topos* of Peach Blossom Spring has thus a strong impact on our subconscious, which makes the short piece of T'ao Yuan-ming a great work of poetry. It is quite different from the political and ideological discourses of modern European Utopian narratives, which have almost nothing to do with the human subconscious, nor with secret dreams of returning upstream into a narrow and dimly lit mountain cave.

## 2) Village versus City

After a few dozen steps of fearful groping in the dark, the fisherman emerges from a sudden and bright opening of the cave. As Kano Naoki once pointed out, it was not simply a way out from a narrow hole to the open air, but it meant for him a psychological liberation, a relief from a wringing anxiety of adventure.<sup>5</sup> The poet T'ao Yuan-ming describes it in only four Chinese characters (「豁然開朗」). What the fisherman sees below, since he must have been standing on a hillside where he came out, is not a panorama of “fifty-four splendid big towns” of parallel scale and parallel plan as on the island of Utopia, nor a heavily armed, ring-formed huge fortress of the City of Sun, but a heartwarming landscape of a peaceful farming village.

The view of the village, which is located on fairly broad and level land, is rather disappointing, at least for the readers of the prose. It has nothing extraordinary nor supernatural in its appearance. It is a very common rural landscape familiar to all Asians of pre-industrial times or even of the pre-high-economic-growth period, with its large expanse of well cultivated fields, rice paddies, brimming irrigation ponds, green mulberry fields, bamboo groves and, probably, peach trees blooming everywhere. It is obvious that the village scenery of the “Peach Blossom Spring” is totally different from that of Arcadias of the Mediterranean region, where poplars, elm trees and cypresses grow high up to the blue sky and shed refreshing shadows over the pasture. T'ao Yuan-ming's landscape is simple, humble, but unexpectedly realistic. In comparison with one of the archetypes of European ideal places, King Alkinoo's Garden of *Odyssey*, where all sorts of trees bear a wealth of fruit all the year round, the village of Peach Blossom Spring has only the most rudimentary farm products. They are simple to be sure, but indispensable and plentiful enough to sustain the villagers', who have been secluded from the outer world for more than five hundred years, according to what the village chief would tell the fisherman later. In addition to rice and field crops, mulberry groves meant that they raised silk worms for their clothes, and bamboo could be used for all kinds of daily-life utensils ranging, as Su Tung-po (蘇東坡, 1036-1101) once wrote in its

praise,<sup>6</sup> from roof tiles, beds, sandals and firewood to rafts, clothes, paper, brushes, combs, measuring rules, and delicious bambooshoot to eat. Each of these, in sport, has “bamboo” as the radical in its Chinese character.

Therefore it is quite logical that villagers’ houses are not made of twigs and moss, nor do they look shabby, but are well-built and ponderous.

### 3) Idyll versus Utopia

It may be unfair to directly compare T’ao Yuan-ming to Thomas More or Tommaso Campanella because, not only the times and cultures they belong to, but their genres, too, are quite different. While *Utopia* and *La città del sole* are eloquent political treatises on ideal city states written in the form of travel accounts, the “Peach Blossom Spring” is poetry. The latter comprises a poem and prose verse, which, while narrating the protagonist’s adventures in an ideal secluded village community, and containing some elements of utopian wisdom, are much closer to the tradition of idylls, if one may borrow a term from Western literary history.

In this Asian idyllic *locus amoenus* of “Peach Blossom Spring,” however, it is not “mooing of herds” nor bleating of sheep which is heard from “the broad ease of the farmlands” as is sung in the *Georgics*, Book II, of Virgil.<sup>7</sup> Very interestingly it is the resounding cries of cocks crowing and dogs barking to each other here and there in the village and fields which reach to the ear of the fisherman, who is perhaps still standing on the hillside. Their cries, especially the mistimed crowing of roosters, mistimed because from the oldest times roosters are entrusted with announcing the coming of dawn for good or for evil in mythology and aubade poetry of the world, resounding here on a warm, a spring afternoon (it must be around noon or in the early afternoon that the fisherman has finally come out of the cave after his long, adventurous upstream rowing). Because of being mistimed, it makes one feel all the more deeply the peacefulness with which the sunny basin of the “Peach Blossom Spring” is saturated.

The couplet of cocks crowing and dogs barking was already used in earlier poetry in China, but it was apparently T’ao Yuan-ming who turned it into a symbol of rural peace. In the first poem of *Returning to the Fields* he wrote in praise of his new country-life:

Hazy, hazy, the distant hamlets of men.  
Steady the smoke of the half-deserted village,  
A dog barks somewhere in the deep lanes,  
A cock crows at the top of the mulberry tree.

(Tr. Arthur Waley)<sup>8</sup>

When it is said in the “Peach Blossom Spring” that roosters and dogs are crowing

and barking to each other, the wording is directly borrowed, to be sure, from the famous chapter LXXX of Laotzu on “the ideal state of small realm and small population”, as is mentioned in all commentaries of the text, Chinese and Japanese, old and new. In Laotzu, however, it is evident that the phrase was used only to mean the closeness of two neighboring countries: they are so close to each other that one can see the other and even hear each others cock’s and dog’s cries. However, one is so satisfied and happy with the given conditions of his life that he will never have a thought of visiting so close a neighboring country until the end of his life. T’ao Yuan-ming took these words and radically converted them to a wonderful metaphor of the simplicity and total peacefulness of rural life, distant from the bustling activities and complexities of urban civilization. This new motif of the *topos* was so convincing and had such a strong lure that later in almost all works of “Peach Blossom Spring” literature and art of East Asia, there would appear the constant pair of cocks crowing and dogs barking. In the late Sung Dynasty, a new word was even coined from it, that of “afternoon cock” (「午雞」) by the pastoral poet, Fan Cheng-da (范成大, 1126-1193).

#### **4) A Paradise for the Aged and Children**

The “Peach Blossom Spring” thus has some elements of the genre of georgic and idyll. But, needless to say, being very far from the European pastoral tradition, there are no idyllic scenes of shepherds and shepherdesses in this Asian *topos* of *locus amoenus*. As is stated in one line of the prose poem, men and women of the of T’ao-hua-yuan community are busily coming and going along criss-cross paths of the village and are diligently and cheerfully performing their chores of tilling and sowing in the fields. Although the entire space of the Peach Blossom Spring has a subtle allusion to eros in its structure, this seems not to be a place for young lovers who would lie on the meadow and sing sweet songs of Amaryllis all day long.

It is, on the contrary, a land of happiness for old folks and children. Happy and free from all sorts of cares and worries, young boys and girls with their flowing locks run about along village paths singing songs, and graybeards enjoy visiting each other and chatting leisurely all day long in the pool of spring sunshine. It seems that a tacit system of mutual security and welfare is working in this small community: the labor of the young and middle-aged villagers supports and guarantees a carefree life for the aged and children.

In the Utopian city of Amaurotum of Thomas More, the privilege of age is, of course, duly respected. At suppertime, for instance, at the call of a bugle, all adult and young members, except the under-fives, of one district of thirty households assemble in the communal dining hall. The place of honour at the center

of the high table is shared only by the District Controller, called Styward, his wife and two of the oldest residents. The best helpings of food are first given to the groups of older people and, after the reading aloud of a piece of didactic literature, like in a monastery, it is also these older members at each table who start discussing serious problems, though not in a humourless way, in order to stimulate the reaction of the young convives and to gauge their character and intelligence.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in Utopia, too, old people can play the role of wisemen, but they do not seem to enjoy the carefree freedom as the old folks of the "Peach Blossom Spring." For Utopians, old age is something to be avoided if possible, something "which not only brings many diseases with it, but is really a disease in itself."<sup>10</sup>

As for children in Utopia and the City of Sun, they are not confidently entrusted to the teachings of nature, nor left to each other's spontaneous care. Both boys and girls in the City of Sun are subject, from the earliest stage of their life, scarcely over the weaning age, to a rigorously fixed course of education in and outside the classrooms and, at the age of seven, they are already engaged in many different lessons of natural and medical sciences, arts and handicrafts and field sports. Through the entire course of this premature education, their vocational aptitude is judged by supervisors and their future profession will be assigned in their early teens, ranging from higher state officials to artisans and farmers.<sup>11</sup> In this regard Japan or Korea today might be called a perfect City of Sun of the late twentieth century.

### **5) The Ancients versus the Moderns**

Upon stepping down into the village of "Peach Blossom Spring," the fisherman is at once surrounded by a crowd of villagers, young and old, who are startled to see for the first time a stranger in their domain. According to them, their ancestors had fled the tyranny and the disorders of Ch'in Dynasty and, having taken refuge in this remote place protected by mountains and rivers on all sides, had never ventured out again. The village therefore had been secluded for more than five hundred and fifty years from any form of communication with the outside world. Ignorant of the vicissitudes of successive dynasties since the Ch'in, and unspoiled therefore by the advance of impudent urban civilization, the villagers were able to maintain and carry on their old and pure manners transmitted from antiquity. Going out for labor in the fields at sunrise and coming home for rest at sunset, they simply and faithfully obeyed the laws of nature and followed the gentle changes of the four seasons. They had no need even of a calendar and there was no taxation from any ruler imposed on the yield of silk in spring or rich harvest of autumn. They all knew the great teaching of Laotzu that human sagacity only perverts the truth of



human nature.

Is this not indeed the antipodes of any Utopia? In modern Utopian cities all sorts of human sagacity are encouraged and mobilized to one system of administration in order to build up what is considered a better, more rational and more efficient life for citizens. The city itself, built in an island or on the top of a rocky hill, is subject to rigorous geometrical planning, and the entire course of the inhabitants' lives, too, is submitted to a centralized administration and to meticulously rationalized regulations, ranging from early education, physical or intellectual labor, and family make-up to uniformed clothes and communal meals and dwellings. In order to marry, young couples after a certain age must first go through a mutual physical examination in stark nudity and then an authorization by a committee for eugenic protection; their sexual intercourse, once every three nights, is also regulated under a very strict astrological rule.<sup>12</sup>

It is well known that the authors of the Utopian tales were sharply critical of the disorders and miseries of their contemporary society. The Chinese poet of the fifth century was as much disgusted as them with his own. But he could still believe in the ancient wisdom and virtues of the Taoist philosophy of the Great Way, which he wanted to see living in the small village of "Peach Blossom Spring". This was therefore a "Wunschzeit" (a desired age) of golden antiquity realized in a "Wunschraum" (a desired space) of rural peace.

## **6) Fantasy or Realism**

Yet the "Peach Blossom Spring" is not a tale of pure fantasy. As stated very plainly at the beginning of the narrative, the incident occurred to a fisherman in one spring of the T'ai-Yuan period (376–396 A.D.) of the Ch'in Dynasty at a locale of the hilly area of Wuling. The description of the villagers' life in T'ao-hua-yuan is fairly realistic and almost terre-à-terre. They are not supernatural beings nor unworldly wizards existing upon by mist and herbs. They are just ordinary peasants, curious about the intruder and news of the outside world he brought in with him, and hospitable enough so that they invite the fisherman to visit their house for a lunch or a supper. At each meal wine is offered and a cock or a chicken, symbols of rural peace, are killed and cooked for a special feast.

Another distinction from fantastic tales (志怪) popular in the time of T'ao Yuan-ming, is that the village of "Peach Blossom Spring" has no supernatural, accelerated lapse of time. The flow of time here is the same as in the outer world, so that the trespassing traveller could return, after several days of stay in the village, safely to his hometown of Wuling without being suddenly whitehaired or numbed to death as in the case of Urashima Taro or Rip van Winkle.

## 7) Fading out of the Ideal Place

In spite of all these realistic aspects, "the Peach Blossom Spring" disappears again and will remain forever a mysterious domain, if not mystic. Upon passing back through the cave of the boundary hills and rowing downstream through the valley of peach trees, the "Peach Blossom Spring" is no longer re-attainable by any human effort or intelligence. The shrewd fisherman on his way home had carefully made marks along the route, contrary to the words of taboo given by the inhabitants of the village at parting. However, when they tried to rediscover the cave, but the marks only lead the fisherman and the staff of the local government dispatched by the magistrate of the province astray. A high-minded gentleman might have made his way to the ideal place, but he died before he could set out.

The "Peach Blossom Spring" thus "fades out" from this world, far beyond mountains and valley Streams, it remains distant and secluded until another warm spring day when another fisherman rows up the stream to its headspring, as absent-minded as the first one. No Utopian tale has such a poetic endless ending.

The Peach Blossom Spring will continue to exist as a "domaine perdu" forever, vividly existing only in one's nostalgic imagination. Modern Utopian cities urged people to constantly renew themselves and to advance at each step toward a greater efficiency of education, administration, production, science and technology and even of human procreation, while the village of T'ao-hua-yuan invites us to take an imaginary adventure backward to a dream of peace and rest bathed in the spring sunshine. In this post-modern era of the end of century, many important ideals of Utopian thinkers have been materialized in the cities of New York, London, Paris and Tokyo or have vanished into the air with the sudden collapse of the socialist regime. It is now time for us, I believe, to set out again in quest of the lost "Peach Blossom Spring". Nostalgia is always deeper and stronger than hope.

### Notes

1. This essay is a revised version in English of an article of mine: "Togen-kyo no shiteki kukan" (The Poetic Space of the Peach Blossom Spring), *Hikaku-bungaku Kenkyu (Studies in Comparative Literature)* No. 32, Department of Comparative Literature and Culture, University of Tokyo, Fall 1977, pp. 1-32.
2. James R. Hightower, *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970.
3. Arthur Waley, *Translations from the Chinese*, New York, A. Knopf, 1914, 1941, p. 89.
4. Gaston Bachelard, *La Terre et les Rêveries du Repos*, José Corti, 1948, pp. 200-203.
5. Kano Naoki, *Gi-shin Gakujutsu Ko (Studies in Wei and Chin Literature)*, Chikumashobo, 1968, p. 239.
6. Quoted in Ito Seiji, *Kaguya-hime no Tanjo (The Birth of the Shining Princess Kaguya)*, Kodan-sha, 1973, p. 113.

7. Virgil, *The Eclogue, Georgics*. Translated by C. D. Lewis, Oxford Paperbacks, 1966.
8. Arthur Waley, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
9. Thomas More, *Utopia*, Translated by Paul Turner, Penguin Books, 1965, pp. 82–83.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
11. Tommaso Campanella, *Taiyo no Miyako (La Città del Sole)*, Translated by Kondo Tsuneichi, Iwanami Bunko, 1992, p. 27 and f.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 39.