

Toward a New Utopia: A Postmodern Interpretation of Tao Yuanming's "Tao Hua Yuan"

WANG Ning

Beijing Language and Culture University

A thousand five hundred years ago, the great Chinese pastoral poet and essayist Tao Yuanming (365–427), after retiring from his official post for several years, wrote his masterpiece "The Peach Blossom Spring: Poem and Story" ("桃花源·詩并記"), which has since been discussed by numerous scholars and critics both at home and abroad. Sometimes, it was even heatedly debated on whether it is a sort of Utopia of the Oriental version or Tao's pessimistic escape from reality which manifests itself as a passive reaction to the then social reality and worldliness. Since the beginning of this century, along with the rise of modern literary and cultural theories in the Western critical circles, scholars have tried to analyze this unique Oriental Utopian work from different perspectives, such as psychoanalysis,¹ structuralism and semiotic and narratology. As I have recently been most interested in the study of postmodernism and its direct or indirect relations with Chinese literature, whether classical or contemporary, I would like to re-read it from the perspective of postmodernity which I for the time being view as a kind of interpretive code with which past and even non-Western literary texts could be observed in a theoretic way (Wang 1993a: 6). But after all, Tao's Tao Hua Yuan in the typical Chinese context is different from the Utopia in the Western context. And furthermore, to observe this unique Oriental version of Utopia from the perspective of postmodernity would certainly enable us to get some new significance from this old text, which would probably be viewed as my new interpretation.

1. The Contemporary Significance of The Peach Blossom Spring

Since we are now living in the contemporary age characterized by plurality and different forces co-existing and complementing each other, why should we take much time and energy to read a classical Chinese prose? Could it only give us some aesthetic attainment or help us to find a better world? Obviously, as a masterpiece in

Chinese literary history, "The Peach Blossom Spring" is indeed of vital significance to us even today, for it is easily read in an allegorical way as a Third World text, starting from which Western people could reflect on its own culture. Only in this way can it produce some new significance. As this very concisely-written masterpiece is of multiple codes, I would first of all point out its contemporary significance before delving into the postmodern code. We all know that after the end of the "Cold War" period marked by the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, the world is said to have entered a so-called "Post-Cold-War" period. In this period, just as Samuel Huntington has pointed out, "...the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future." (22) It is not surprising that the publication of his essay roused a great deal of controversy and debate among the overseas Chinese communities as well as among the Arab nations. People just question themselves: where will our world go? Will it continue to be in a state of chaos and conflict or in a state of stability and prosperity? Which will be dominating over the current world, peace or war? Obviously, as far as the greatest majority of the world people are concerned, the former one particularly appeals to them, for it has long been a human instinct to seek a peaceful and comfortable life. It is also a human instinct to construct various ideal places in their dreams as they find it difficult to obtain in the realistic world. This could even date back to the primitive society although at the time people's life could by no means be modern and civilized as now. In Chinese literary works, one of the earliest beautiful constructions of an ideal place haunting people of different generations is Tao Yuanming's "The Peach Blossom Spring".² To read it today, we cannot help realizing the fact that the more modern conditions we have, the more are we thinking of the unforgettable place described by Tao, especially when we are not satisfied with the present realities and cannot but be nostalgic.

In the international sense, it is true that the postcolonial attempt to permeate in the Oriental and Third World countries politically, economically and culturally is still discernible. The academic dialogue and cultural exchange between the East and the West is so far by no means really equal. The recent construction of the "Orient" or "Orientalism" in the eye of Western people and that of the "Occident" or "Occidentalism" in the eye of Eastern people particularly represent this phenomenon in the contemporary era. But after all, people are always seeking for a peaceful, quiet and harmonious world where there is no armed conflict or racial discrimination, nor

are there any conflicts between nations, ideologies, cultures and civilizations. We are fully aware that such an attempt is nothing but a sort of utopia, but we still wish to construct such an unrealistic utopia, even though just in a literary work. But why do we have such a state of mind at the time toward the twenty-first century? To answer this question, we had better re-read Tao's work.

When Tao wrote his great work "The Peach Blossom Spring," he just intended to describe a sort of ideal place far from the madding crowd in the urban areas. In this place, everything is natural, harmonious, lively and beautiful: "Mulberry, bamboo and other trees and plants grew, and criss-cross paths skirted the fields."³ People are working hard without complaint: "The old and young were carefree and happy." Everybody has equal opportunities without competition. Even the animals are taken good care of: "The sounds of cocks crowing and dogs barking could be heard from one courtyard to the next." In this place, there is no such thing as a ruler ruling other people. People in *Tao Yuan* are very kind and helpful to the fisherman who has lost his way and who is a stranger himself. There do not have any quarrels or conflicts among villagers. They help each other and cooperate to build their home into a communal world. Obviously, based on his tiredness toward the complicated interpersonal relations, his discontent with social reality and war and conflict in the feudal society and his seclusive experience in the countryside, Tao boldly predicts a sort of utopia which actually acts as a reaction to the evil social reality, representing his true love for a peaceful and stable life and dislike for struggle between man and man and between community and community. This is also a silent protest against the corruption of the ruling class at the time. Undoubtedly, this great work reflects Tao's philosophy of life and aesthetic idea of return to nature and return to the countryside. Obviously, Tao's bold and prophetic construction of *Tao Yuan* is nothing but an ideal place far from the chaotic worldliness. Since then, every time people suffer from natural disasters or other destructive losses made by man himself, such as war or national conflict or other kinds of turmoil, they would not but think of this ideal place described by Tao and other utopian constructors after him: for one thing, they are tired of the ugly worldliness, and for another thing, Tao has actually created an ideal home for human beings to live, where there is no drastic conflict or quarrel; everything is peaceful and elegant, beautiful and natural; everyone is polite and nice never offending others. I think this is not only the original meaning of Tao's creation of this work but also the basic significance we could discern today.

Apparently, from the perspective of historical materialism, such a fantastic story could not have existed in the human world although it might have happened in a literary work. The fact that (after the "high-minded gentleman Liu Zhiji" died) "no one has ever been interested in trying to find such a place" also shows in an allegorical way that literary creation (of a utopia) could not be done again, for

history never repeats itself, but history does repeat itself in an allegorical way, or more specifically, in a literary work where the author's disgust for the ugly worldliness and liking for beautiful nature find particular embodiment or in our interpretation of the text where the historical event is presented in an allegorical and artistic way. So it is not curious that both Western and Chinese scholars appreciate this work so much so that they continuously discuss it trying to find some new significance from it which is stimulating their drive toward the construction of a new ideal place of their own.

Our world today is apparently far more progressive and advanced than the Peach Blossom Spring dreamed in Tao's time. We have such advanced science and technology that everything in our daily life is made as convenient as possible. We could make any miracles which our forefather could never even have dreamed of. But why, as modern men living in the turn of the century, we often dream of something utopian or something we can never get hold of? It is true that men are always nostalgic, especially in literary imagination although they know it could not come true in reality. According to the contemporary theory of reception, if a text is written, its author is "dead". The text could be interpreted by every generation of readers from their different perspectives, based on their own living and reading experience in their own time. In this way, the new significance of Tao's ideal place is possibly rediscovered on the basis of our close reading in regard to the present reality. It serves as a kind of reaction to the unsatisfactory reality with an idealized rosy dream though dream is after all a dream and can never become true. It is still worth making such a dream if we cannot attain the dreamy reality. Obviously, the significance does not just lie in Tao's utopian construction, but rather, in his prediction of an ideal place for present-day people who live in a world of instability and industrial pollution but who are somewhat nostalgic by trying to construct various kinds of utopias despite the fact that on many occasions they fail. In the study of classical Chinese literature, many Chinese scholars do think that Tao's construction of the Peach Blossom Spring more or less expresses his passive attitude towards world affairs or a kind of escape from society, or his cynical attitude toward the unsatisfactory reality. But in today's world, after the open conflict between the East and the West, cultural difference will function to a large extent. So it is all the more significant to re-read Tao's poem and story of the Peach Blossom Spring even though we do not believe in his fantastic description. It is always a good thing that we have such an ideal place to search after like Tao's Peach Blossom Spring in literature, where there is no drastic conflict or contradiction between man and man or between man and nature, nor is there urban chaos or industrial pollution, etc. Evidently, it is a kind of utopia which can hardly be realized since we live in the human world, but it is still necessary for people to seek for such an impossible ideal

place. Perhaps this is what I could read from the modern perspective, which will help me to go into its next cultural code: postmodernity.

2. Postmodernizing “The Peach Blossom Spring”

Of the various postmodern constructions, Jean-François Lyotard’s seems more acceptable for us to observe some past and even non-Western literary texts although Fredric Jameson’s is more influential in the Chinese context now. To Lyotard, the postmodern is “undoubtedly a part of the modern”, a work “can become modern only if it is first postmodern” (79), therefore, “*Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)” (81). Similarly, Ihab Hassan’s variety of postmodernism is also characterized by recovering “the art of multivocation” (25). In their view, the significance of the postmodern or postmodernity lies in its non-periodization, especially when it is used to interpret literary texts in the past and non-Western cultural contexts. As far as postmodernism and its relations with modernism are concerned, I have offered my own constructions on several occasions and even tried to distinguish between the two (Wang 1993b: 51–2). So in this essay, I will try to avoid using the concept of postmodernism, for it is evidently a product generated in the Western cultural soil although it could be metamorphosed in some Oriental or Third World countries (54–7). I would rather observe “The Peach Blossome Spring” as an allegory, a national allegory characterized by typical Chinese construction of its own utopias. In this way, we could easily find its postmodern features in our close reading.

1. *Contingencies and incompleteness.* To the modernists, everything is put in accordance with the law of causality, but in postmodernism, there often have such uncertain things as contingencies and incompleteness. Undoubtedly, the fisherman in “The Peach Blossom Spring” finds the wonderful place totally by chance, or due to his “unknowing”, which is a contingent event. If one wants to do the same again simply depending on this contingent experience, he/she is bound to be disappointed. So when the fisherman himself really intends to find such a place again, he inevitably fails though he has “marked the route”. Even the man sent by the magistrate and the “high-minded gentleman” Mr. Liu Zhiji could not avoid their doomed failure. Therefore, since then, “no one has been interested in trying to find such a place.” In a world of postmodernity, anything could take place beyond one’s expectation, and people may happen to encounter with anything which has neither beginning nor end. Nor do people know where they come from or where they are to go. They only sitck to the present. This is especially embodied in Tao’s description of the Peach Blossom Spring. The imcompleteness of the fisherman’s and other people’s looking for the Peach Blossom Spring has certainly made it open for people

of the later generations to continue this endless venture.

2. *Deconstruction of the hierarchies.* The postmodernists always aim at breaking through the various artificial hierarchies, which is also represented in the Peach Blossom Spring a thousand five hundred years ago. As is well known to all, China is a highly hierarchical country, where such concepts as that of “the three cardinal guides” and that of “the five constant virtues” (三綱五常) are extremely prevailing due to its long feudal tradition, namely, ruler guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife; women should have benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity. This artificial binary opposition has even influenced modern men’s mode of thinking. But in Tao’s ideal society, “Men and women were coming and going about their work in the fields... The old and young were carefree and happy.” When people see the fisherman, they treat him quite friendly as if he is one of the community. Obviously, there is no such thing as the so-called “male-centric” world, nor is there any hierarchical system. There is no mention of the leader of the village. Everyone is equal, even the clothes they wore are nothing better than those worn by ordinary people. In this world, there is the only division between sexes and between ages which do not make any sense to put people in different ranks. All the binary oppositions and artificial hierarchies have thus been deconstructed in Tao’s imaginary world. It represents Tao’s idealized society of peacefulness, quietness and harmoniousness.

3. *Fragmentariness and labyrinth.* Postmodern literary works are characterized by fragmentariness and even “schizophrenic” structure. An action could take place at any time and be short-circuited all of a sudden, which could easily be found in such postmodern works as John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* and Robbe-Grillet’s *Dans le Labyrinthe*. Although Tao’s work has a relatively complete plot as compared with the above Western postmodernist texts, it is still far from enough as compared with a traditional Chinese narrative work. The nameless fisherman is allegorized symbolic of anyone who might happen to find the Peach Blossom Spring for the first time but fails for the second time. We do not know where he comes from except that he is a fisherman of Wuling and his whereabouts at the end of the story, for this is not so important as an allegorical work of eternal artistic value. The reason why he and his countrymen can no longer find the Peach Blossom Spring is partly because of the short-circuitedness of the narrative itself and partly because of their being lost in the labyrinth designed by a hidden God. And the fragmentariness of this narration anticipated a kind of reaction to the Chinese mode of thinking of modernity in the contemporary era.

4. *Multiple explanations and democratic codes.* Postmodernism always maintains a sort of multiple interpretations of a literary text rather than sticks to a central theme. Just as Douwe Fokkema correctly points out, “In Postmodernism,

the most 'democratic' of all literary codes, the role of the reader is emphasized even more than in Modernism" (48). It is true that the strategy of a postmodern reading lays more emphasis on the function of the reader and the process of the reader's response to and creative reception of the text, from which the new significance is produced. The postmodernity characterized by anti-interpretation also finds embodiment in the multiple and even democratic codes of "The Peach Blossom Spring" in which the signifier and signified sometimes interact with the signifier's moving endlessly and the signified being of more interpretations. Thus as readers, we are confronted with some reading gap which we may well fill up in the course of our dynamic reading and creative interpretation. Even in my present essay, I have already tried to interpret the text from both the traditional modern perspective as well as the postmodern perspective. We can certainly find more symbols of psychoanalysis if we read from either the Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective. That is perhaps why the masterpiece could be discussed and analyzed by one generation of scholars after another both in the East and in the West.

Obviously, if we continue to read and search after more postmodern elements in the text, we will certainly be by no means disappointed, but for the time being, I just intend to indicate the possibility of reading "The Peach Blossom Spring" from more theoretic perspectives, including that of postmodernity.

3. Tentative Conclusion: Recasting Postmodernity

In the field of East-West comparative literature studies, scholars, either Western or Chinese are more interested in interpreting an Oriental literary text from the perspective of Western critical theory, in an attempt to testify to what extent this theory is effective for interpreting the non-Western text. Few of them have attempted to start from a Western theory to the text proper and then return to the theory after an interpretive cycle so that the theory is questioned rather than just proved effective and finally recast in the course of the reading of the non-Western text. I have already observed Tao's "The Peach Blossom Spring" from the postmodern perspective and got some new significance from my reading experience. Now I would arrive at the tentative conclusion. First of all, I would affirm once again that postmodernism is indeed a product generated in the Western cultural soil which has much to do with its predecessor modernism, while in China, there lacks such a full-fledged modernist period or even a solid foundation of modernity. So the reception of postmodernism in China has only produced some metamorphosed versions characterized by Oriental or Chinese cultural reception and reconstruction (Wang 1993b: 54-7). But despite all that, there are some parallel relations between Chinese and Western culture beyond the so-called influence-reception studies, which makes it possible for

us to undertake East-West comparative poetic studies. Just as Tao points out in his work that the seeking for the Peach Blossom Spring is by no means complete, the interpretation of this text from the perspective of postmodernity has not come to its end, for one of the characteristics of the postmodern spirit is its incompleteness of seeking for an ideal interpretation close to the truth. Since Tao's work was written long before this century when the theory of postmodern was not born, it unintentionally anticipated its birth in the 20th century. Although we cannot testify that the postmodernists have got some revelations from classical Chinese culture and literature, especially that of the Daoism-oriented, it has indeed something parallel with the principle of postmodernism, which might well inspire us in our future research and even stimulate us to explore many more Oriental texts which are obviously "mysterious" but attractive to our Western colleagues in the domain of comparative literature studies. So in this aspect, the present essay is just a beginning in the course of seeking for such an ideal interpretation of the ideal place.

Notes

- * Here I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Professor Haga Toru and Dr. Yokota-Murakami Takayuki, whose insightful suggestions and comments have undoubtedly helped me to revise my paper delivered at the Symposium into the present form.
1. In this aspect, James Hightower's translation is very popular and largely quoted, which is on the whole faithful to the original except for its inevitable loss of the original poetic style and aesthetic taste. If Western scholars base their interpretation on this version, it is very easy for them to find something psychoanalytic. For instance, in 1990, Professor Haga Toru was invited to give a lecture in the Institute of Comparative Literature at Peking University in which he mentioned the Freudian elements in this Chinese text.
 2. Although Tao's construction of the Peach Blossom Spring is not the earliest "Utopia" created in Chinese culture, it is largely and apparently indebted to Laozi's idealized society characterized by "little country with a small population" where people are almost isolated without any contact with the outside world. In this way, Tao's work was written under the influence of Daoism of traditional Chinese philosophy.
 3. All the quotations from "Tao Hua Yuan" are taken from James Hightower's translation "The Peach Blossom Spring" with slight changes.

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