

FROM HOME TO UTOPIA, AND BACK AGAIN: LOCATING AND RELOCATING THE PEACH BLOSSOM SPRING

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Abstract

Tao Qian's "Peach Blossom Spring" (*Tao hua yuan ji*) is the archetypal Chinese tale of utopian travel. The tale itself has been well-travelled through pictorial and poetic representations since the fifth century. This essay focuses on three artists whose reworking of the Peach Blossom Spring exemplifies the ways in which a conventional literary motif can be revitalised and reinterpreted at various historical junctures. Shitao's (1642-1707) Peach Blossom Spring turns the utopian theme inward to create a private elegy of loss, displacement and obliterated identity in the wake of the Ming-Qing dynastic transition. Zhang Daqian (1899-1983) uses the motif of the Peach Blossom Spring to project his experience of exile and homeward longing, set against the vicissitudes of modern China. Xu Bing's (b. 1955) installations tap into public anxieties about the place of humanity amidst profound environmental and socio-political change in the era of globalisation. By analysing the visual reinterpretations of the Peach Blossom Spring by artists whose creative lives coincided with periods of intense social and political change, I demonstrate that tradition and modernity are mutually implicated in the context of Chinese visual culture, just as precedent and innovation are equally important considerations in the history of Chinese art.

Introduction

Tao Qian's 陶潛 (365-427 CE) "Peach Blossom Spring" (*Taohua yuan ji* 桃花源記)¹ is the archetypal Chinese tale of utopian travel that has inspired numerous interpretations in literary criticism, poetry, prose and pictorial illustrations. Traditional commentary on the Peach Blossom Spring and poetic reworking of the theme tend to view the story as either pseudo-historical or supernatural. As a result, the "Peach Blossom Spring" has often been interpreted as a social utopia or a mythical paradise. These interpretations have been so influential over the centuries that the Peach Blossom Spring has become synonymous to utopia, paradise or a Chinese "Shangri-la". However, as literary and visual representations of the theme have become increasingly conventionalised and

1 In this essay, the title of Tao Qian's original story, *Taohua yuan ji*, is translated into English as the "Peach Blossom Spring," with quotation marks. Without quotation marks, Peach Blossom Spring is either used as a phrase that refers to the literary theme or describes a painting on the theme. When there is no specific title, a Peach Blossom Spring painting is generically referred to as a *Taoyuan tu*.

clichéd, the interpretation of Tao Qian's original story drifts farther away from the immediate context of the poet's life and work. In this article, I propose that, when read in conjunction with Tao Qian's poetry celebrating idyllic simplicity and his lifelong quest for a private sanctuary, the "Peach Blossom Spring" reveals profound personal meanings that have been overshadowed by its utopian or mythical interpretations. Surveying the long tradition of visual reinterpretations of the Peach Blossom Spring at various geographical and historical junctions, I further demonstrate that it is the tension between the private and public dimensions of Tao Qian's story that lends itself to crossing historical divides and becoming an enduring artistic motif and a still-potent metaphor for individual and collective experiences of dislocation, loss and nostalgia.

I will focus my analysis on three artists whose creative lives coincided with periods of intense social and political change in Chinese history: Shitao 石濤 (1642-1707) during the Ming-Qing dynastic transition, Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899-1983) throughout the Republican and the Communist eras, and finally, Xu Bing 徐冰 (b. 1955) at the forefront of 21st-century globalisation. The three artists' reworking of the Peach Blossom Spring exemplifies the ways in which a conventional literary motif can be revitalised and enriched when personal and collective experiences conditioned by historical circumstances are brought into the interpretative and creative process. Shitao's *Taoyuan tu* 桃源圖 turns the utopian theme inward to create a private elegy of loss, displacement and obliterated identity, injecting new vitality into a staid pictorial tradition. Centuries later, Zhang Daqian also used the motif of the Peach Blossom Spring to project his experience of exile amidst the vicissitudes of modern China. Though no less a maverick artist than Shitao, Zhang chose to express his nostalgia and longing through his homage to the time-honoured *Taoyuan tu* tradition. Whilst not explicitly referencing his personal history of forging an artistic career on foreign, non-native ground, Xu Bing's *Tao Hua Yuan* 桃花源 installations tap into public anxieties about the place of humanity amidst profound environmental and sociopolitical change, sentiments that are endemic in contemporary experiences of mass migration, diaspora, and globalisation.

The original Peach Blossom Spring

The Tang poets were amongst the first to find traces of immortality in the Peach Blossom Spring. Words such as *xian* 仙 (transcendent) and *ling* 靈 (numinous) appeared in Wang Wei's 王維 *Taoyuan xing* 桃源行, one of the earliest poetic variations on Tao Qian's prose. The high romantic spirit of the Tang certainly had contributed to the Peach Blossom Spring's designation as an immortals' abode, and popular Daoism's fascination with eternal life perpetuated this imagination. Others, such as the Song poet Su Shi 蘇軾, countered the claim of immortality with historical references in the story—the mention of people who fled the cruelty of the Qin Emperor and found refuge in the mountains. Su Shi, with his characteristic commonsense, argued that the inhabitants were certainly not the same refugees who survived from 200 BC to 300 AD, achieving unlikely longevity, but rather the descendants of those Qin subjects who went into hiding.

The literati gradually abandoned the mortal/immortal debate, and compromised on seeing the story as an envisagement of utopia in the form of a Golden Age ruled by ancient sage kings or an agrarian society that was also egalitarian. Whilst this widely accepted interpretation might sufficiently account for the world within the Peach Blossom Spring, it does not concern itself with the problem of gaining access to that world. In the story, the realistic description of life within the Peach Blossom Spring is curiously placed in a frame structure. The fisherman was “unmindful” and “unaware of the distance he had gone,” and, as if waking up from a dream, he could not find the Peach Blossom Spring again after he had left it.

Zhang Longxi, in his review of Douwe Fokkema’s work on utopian fiction in China and the West, notes that the tension between the collective and the individual is less pronounced in the Chinese utopian vision than that of the Western, and modern utopias in general tend to be more concerned with individual happiness (Zhang 2012: 335-336). Whilst social harmony is a prominent feature of the world within the Peach Blossom Spring, Tao Qian’s utopia is described, ultimately, as a personal experience. It is a realm that was accessible to the fisherman when he was alone, and the cave entrance was so narrow that it admitted only one person’s body. When the prefecture conducted an organised search, it was unattainable. Apparently Tao Qian’s utopia is not intended as a blueprint for social reform, but as a personal sanctuary. The Daoists are right: it is only when without intention could one attain awareness; those who search deliberately would not find the way.² But if Tao Qian’s vision represented religious enlightenment, it would have been one that was gained and then lost. Whereas most utopias are projected into the future (Frye 1965), the Peach Blossom Spring dwells upon the past. Tao Qian’s story describes a way of life that belonged to the past, idealised and hidden. It is a lost world, accessed through nostalgia. Like a childhood home, it is familiar yet strange, a place which can only be momentarily revisited.

Indeed, longing for home is nothing short of an obsession in Tao Qian’s own life. A scion of an old family of officials, Tao Qian was born into genteel poverty and had seen his family in steady decline. Early in his career, he reluctantly held several minor positions in order to support his aging mother and growing family. In 405, he finally quit and went home, an event celebrated in his poem “The Return” (*Guìqūlái cǐ* 歸去來辭). Since then, Tao lived in constant poverty and sought solace in his simple, rustic surroundings at the foot of Mount Lu (Lushan 廬山), in today’s Jiangxi province.

Tao Qian’s “Peach Blossom Spring” and “The Return” are two pieces of writing that appear to be antithetical in sentiment and intent. Yet Susan Nelson has noted a strong link between the two, seeing both as classic expressions of the ideal of the recluse (Nelson 1986). Nelson’s intertextual reading also suggests that Tao Qian’s poetry may contain the best clues to his enigmatic utopia. In “Imitations” (*Nǐgǔ qí liú* 擬古其六),

2 Daoist influences on Tao Qian’s poetry have been amply explored by scholars such as Kang-I Sun Chang (1986), Zhang Longxi (1992) and Suyuan Lu (2017).

he lamented that he was “tired of hearing the world’s comment”. In “Returning to the Farm to Dwell” (*Gui tianyuan ju qi yi* 歸園田居 其一) he rejoiced, “For long I was a prisoner in a cage/And now I have my freedom back again”. In a letter to his sons Yan, etc., (*Yu zi yan deng shu* 與子儼等疏) he wrote, “Often in the fifth or sixth month/ I would lie down beneath the northern window,/ And when the cool, fitful breeze arose,/ I would call myself a man of ancient time”. (Hightower 1970)

Biographical information also provides plausible explanations as to why Tao Qian’s utopia looks backward instead of forward. The decline of his family through the generations may have caused him to look on their past glories in a nostalgic light. The fall of Eastern Jin to the rule of Liu Yu 劉裕 (363–422), who later founded the Liu Sung Dynasty in 420, also prompted Tao Qian to see a parallel between his own circumstances and those who fled the oppressions of the Qin.

But Tao Qian did not flee into the mountains. He returned home, where hunger, poverty and strife were made bearable with peace, tranquility and idyllic simplicity. The Peach Blossom Spring is a poetic commingling of all these realities, yearlings and imaginings. Yet by framing that utopian vision in a dream-like past, the poet reveals what his utopia really is: nowhere, or a home to which one cannot find one’s way back.

After paradise: Shitao’s *Taoyuan tu*

Paintings of the Peach Blossom Spring began to be recorded in literary sources since the early Tang.³ The artists’ names were seldom mentioned, as painting still remained largely a skilled craft, and the concept of the painter as an individual artist was yet to emerge. According to the descriptions, Tang paintings of the Peach Blossom Spring appear to be mostly decorative illustrations of paradise scenes.

Court painters in the Song Dynasty are also said to have had used the theme in their works. Zhao Boju 趙伯駒 (fl. 12th century) once painted a version of the *Taoyuan tu* that became a frequent reference for later painters. The painting did not survive. But Zhao’s *Autumn Colors over Streams and Mountains* (江山秋色圖) (Fig. 1), a painting of stylised figures and buildings against a magnificent backdrop of twisting mountain forms in blue and green, may suggest the way he might have treated a paradise scene or a narrative landscape of the Peach Blossom Spring.

During the Yuan Dynasty, the theme was rediscovered by literati painters, and it soon became a staple in their repertoire. As with all things literati, a strong personal touch characterised their approach. Painters at this time were less concerned with depicting a site or visualising a story. The narrative aspect was downplayed, and the landscape often had a lyrical quality that evoked a state of mind.

3 This brief summary of the pictorial representations of the Peach Blossom Spring up to the Ming is based on Dorothy Chen-Courtin’s dissertation, “The Literary Theme of the ‘Peach Blossom Spring’ in Pre-Ming and Ming Painting” (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1982).



Figure 1: Zhao Boju, Autumn Colors over Streams and Mountains 江山秋色圖 (section). Handscroll, ink and pigment on silk, c. 1160. 56.6 x 323.2 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Most of the numerous Peach Blossom Spring paintings we see today are from the Ming. Considering the Ming preoccupation with emulating the ancients, it is believed that the period's principal contribution to painting was in the interpretation and synthesis of previous styles and currents. Peach Blossom Spring paintings from this era too exhibit the desire to be comprehensive, as generic paradise scenes exist side by side with highly subjective "landscapes of the mind". Ming painters either illustrated the legend in its entirety or sought to capture the mood of the theme with a minimum number of signal images such as the stream, flowering peach trees, the cave or the fisherman. Peach Blossom Spring paintings eventually became a cultural phenomenon in its own right. A genre was formed, and repetition gradually hardened into conventions. (Chen-Courtin 1982)

More than a thousand years after Tao Qian wrote the "Peach Blossom Spring", Shitao (1642-1707) painted a small cave image which, without the artist's own inscription, would not have been identified as a *Taoyuan tu* (Fig 2). The painting is included in a landscape album of Mount Huang (Huangshan 黃山), dedicated to Shitao's friend Huang Yanlü 黃硯旅 (1661-1725). The artist's inscription suggests the almost compulsory practice of painting the Peach Blossom Spring in his time, and lightly mocks it:

The *Taoyuan tu* these days are getting meticulously detailed. I did this one with a few quick brushstrokes and am not sure if I succeeded. Those who know must have something to say about this.⁴

It is a small-scale monochrome painting. All the familiar iconography of *Taoyuan tu* is discarded except the entrance to the cave. The cave, instead of being rocky and rugged, is fleshed out with soft brush strokes to produce an image that resembles the entrance to the womb. On the right-side edge of the cave entrance, in the foreground,

4 My translation is based on text and image from Li Yeshuang's book, *Shitao's World* (Taipei: Xiongshi Tushu Company, 1973).

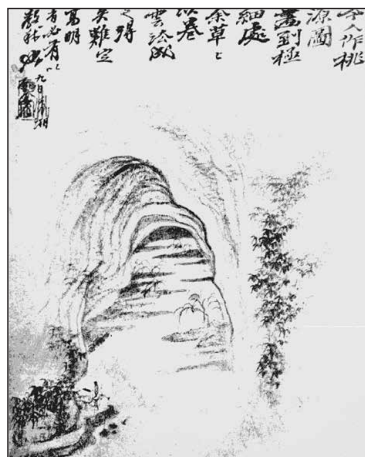


Figure 2: Shitao, *Taoyuan tu*, circa 1690s. Reproduction based on Li Yeshuang 李葉霜. 1973. *Shitao de shijie* 石濤的世界 (Shitao's world). Taipei: Xiongshi tushu chubans gongsi: 115.

is the small figure of the fisherman. We are not certain if he has just entered the cave or he has just left it. The ambiguity here shuts out the two worlds on either side of the cave and focuses exclusively on the entrance itself. The painting brings us back to the opening paragraph of Tao Qian's "Peach Blossom Spring":

During the Tai-yuan period (376-396) of the Chin Dynasty a fisherman of Wu-ling 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. (Hightower 1970: 255)

Read with Shitao's image in mind, the fisherman's entry into the Peach Blossom Spring suddenly seems like a reenactment of the passage of birth. It now seems uncertain whether he is entering a utopian world or simply reliving the memory of the motherly womb. From a psychoanalytical point of view, the Peach Blossom Spring contains one of the most potent archetypal images — that of the archetype of birth. The

power of the archetype, according to true Jungians, lies in the collective unconscious, transcending temporal and geographical boundaries. It is no mere accident that Shitao's *Taoyuan tu*, whilst discarding all other narrative details, retains only the most essential one: the cave entrance.

In this painting, Shitao gives the non-mimetic tradition of literati painting a radical spin, and miraculously, brings us back to Tao Qian's original story. This is achieved not by faithfully illustrating the story but by focusing in and intensifying it. That the fisherman's entry into the cave can signify childbirth from a mother's womb might not have been what Tao Qian had in mind. But Shitao's image opens up new possibilities for reinterpretation. Shitao, a descendant of the Ming royal family who lived a vagrant life under Manchu rule, certainly had shared Tao Qian's feelings of nostalgia. An orphan, a monk, and then a returnee to the secular world who made a living as a professional painter, Shitao's longing for home was often not just a sentiment, but a genuine physical and emotional need. If Tao Qian's utopian vision had derived from a private urge to return home, a home that was also utopian, what could be a more apt metaphor for that home than a mother's womb?

Although Qing painting in general is said to be repetitive and lacking originality, the decades that immediately followed the fall of the Ming produced some of the most innovative painters in Chinese history. It was during this period that painters brought new perspectives to the Peach Blossom Spring, a theme that had become increasingly conventionalised. At the time of the Qing conquest in 1644, the Ming loyalist Chen Hongshou 陳洪綬 (1598-1652) painted a *Taoyuan tu*, as he wrote in his inscription, to express his feelings about the circumstances of the times. In a *Taoyuan tu* painted by Zha Shibiao 查士標 (1615-1698) in 1696, the scene has none of the traditional paradise flavour (Fig. 3). Many of these paintings have not survived, but the colophons and commentary suggest that they envisioned the Peach Blossom Spring in a personal, disillusioned light, reflecting a shift away from imageries of fantasy (Nelson 1986: 41).



Figure 3: Zha Shibiao (Cha Shih-piao) (1615-1698), *The Peach Blossom Spring* 桃源圖 (section). Handscroll, ink and pigment on paper, 1696. 35.23 x 312.75 cm. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City.

The Peach Blossom Spring theme gained new significance for early Qing painters, especially those who considered themselves *yimin* 遺民 or “leftover subjects.” Never openly declared himself a loyalist, Shitao must have felt the change of the times as did other “leftover subjects”. His relation to the Ming royal family would only have made his case more sensitive. Shitao had created at least two versions of *Taoyuan tu*. The album leaf, as we have seen earlier, eschews conventional trappings of the theme and focuses exclusively on the cave entrance. His handscroll version (Fig 4), although following a less iconoclastic route, expresses a sense of involvement that is both subtle and intimate.

Painted with his characteristically assertive brushstrokes, Shitao’s Peach Blossom Spring retells the whole legend through an economic use of setting and narrative detail. The painting begins with a brief visual void on the right, then a conical hill with some rooftops. There is a suggestion of rice fields, and in the distance a man ploughs the field with a buffalo. The viewer suddenly realises that he is already inside the Peach Blossom Spring. A dramatic mountain range loops in from the top-left to encircle the enchanted village. Three villagers go up the path to greet the fisherman from the right. Around them are simple thatched cottages, a wooden bridge over a stream, rice-fields and a scattering of trees. On the other side of the mountain, a stream snakes its way between the precipitous rocks and flowering peach trees. The boat is moored, hiding behind the mountain range. More mountains and clouds. As the scene fades away, a city wall serves as a reminder that this is where the mundane world begins.

The lost realm seems definitively separated from our world by the stream flowing between the deep gorges. Furthermore, rocky precipices appear to be literally fending off intruders. Finally, the simplicity of the village huts, in juxtaposition with the ornate, double-tiered tile roof and the massive city wall, further differentiate the Peach Blossom Spring from the external world. However, by reversing the story-telling sequence, first the lost valley and the encounter, then the boat in the stream and finally the outside world, Shitao’s *Peach Blossom Spring* offers the viewer a different vantage point. Such a presentation not only elicits surprise, but also suggests that the idyllic life within the valley, in sharp contrast to the embattled outside world, may not be something accessible only to an immortal or in a dream. Already within the site of Peach Blossom Spring at the opening of the scroll, the viewer is invited to come into spontaneous and immediate identification with the fisherman and the villagers. Physical and emotional closeness to the lost village also constitutes a rejection of the mundane world, of the here and now.

Portraying a world at once fantastic and ordinary, remote yet within reach, the painter makes his political implications almost palpable. The Peach Blossom Spring, once believed to be a refuge for the descendants of the Qin subjects who fled the cruelties of the First Emperor, could easily lend itself to expressing Ming loyalist sentiments, which were not foreign to Shitao and his social circles. Yet, as we delve further into this painting and related works, a simple, straightforward allegorical reading based on Ming loyalism would not do full justice to the rich complexities of Shitao’s work and its historical context.



Figure 4: *The Peach Blossom Spring*, Shitao (c. 1641-1717). Handscroll. Ink and light color on paper. 25 x 158 cm. Artist's colophon, signature, three seals, dated 15th day of the 7th lunar month, no year. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Figure 5: *The Ancestral Tombs of the Fei Family* 費氏先塋圖, Shitao, 1702, ink and pigment on paper, 29 x 110 cm. Musée national des Arts asiatiques-Guimet, Paris.

Dated but with no specified year of composition, Shitao's *Peach Blossom Spring* was painted no earlier than 1690, and some art historians put the date in the last decade of the artist's life.⁵ The artist's inscription reads:

The Spirit Mountains are full of deep recesses;
In such a gorge, a village lies enclosed.
A fisherman comes to it, quite by hazard –
Peach blossom petals scent the flowing stream.
Once left, it's lost; who could he ask the way of?
And the road back is gone from his memory.
It's not like the summit of Mount T'ien-t'ai,
Where one can return by crossing the Stone Bridge.

The Peach Blossom Spring picture: on the zhong-yuan day, I was seized by exhilaration and drew this, using a poem by my fellow student Fei Ziheng. Qingxiang yiren, Dadi zi, Ji. (Chen-Courtin 1982: 233)

The emphasis of Fei's poem is not so much on the peaceful life within the Peach Blossom Spring as it is on the impossibility of finding the way back to it. "Once left, it's lost" and it belongs only to memory. The last two lines imply that even an immortalised place such as Mount T'ien-t'ai is more traceable than the lost village. What does the village really stand for, for Fei Ziheng, who apparently commissioned the painting, and for Shitao, who painted it?

Fei Ziheng 費滋衡 (1664-?), more commonly known as Fei Xihuang 費錫璜, belonged to a prominent Ming loyalist family and was one of Yangzhou's most prominent intellectual figures. His grandfather, Fei Jingyu 費經虞 (1599-1671), had become an official in the final years of the Ming dynasty. Fei Xihuang's father, Fei Mi 費密, was deeply involved in the resistance against the Manchus in their home province of Sichuan. After their hometown Xinfan fell in 1653, Fei Mi moved his family to Mianxian, where they took refuge along with other Xinfan families in a small village, White Deer Village. Some families later settled there, but Fei Mi left Mianxian, taking his family to join his father in Yangzhou in 1658. For fifteen years, from 1644 to 1658, the family knew a history of withdrawal, resistance, refuge and exile.⁶ The Fei family finally settled in Yangzhou and rose to prominence, but their hometown in Sichuan remained a haunting memory for generations. Fei Xihuang wrote in an ode about the ancestral home he had at that point never seen:

A hundred mu of farmland, a village of peach blossom: A hundred different types of bird congregate there, and monkeys screech after each other in play. This was true pleasure. But bandits came from Shenxi and Gansu and turned

5 Both James Cahill and Jonathan Hay date the painting after 1702, the year Shitao finished *The Ancestral Tombs of the Fei Family* (Fig. 5).

6 Biographical information on the Fei family is based on Jonathan Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 61.

the city and the surrounding area into a cemetery. Over a thousand-mile area they destroyed the homefires. For three years there was no cultivation; people watched for each other's death and ate [the dead]. My home village was in ruins and uninhabitable, so my parents left the village and its families behind and came east to Jiangdu [Yangzhou]. As I look back toward Ba and Shu it seems as remote as the Big Dipper. I have been thinking of going back west, but the road to Shu is extremely dangerous; I wanted to go by water, but the Qutang gorge is impassible; I was going to take the mountain roads, but the Sword Pavilions and Bronze Bridge are difficult to climb. I look westward to the graveside trees and my heart suffers in sorrow. (Hay 2001: 62-63)

The preoccupation with the ancestral home in faraway Sichuan was the family's most tangible link to their past, a preoccupation which resulted in Shitao's 1702 panoramic handscroll, *The Ancestral Tombs of the Fei Family* 費氏先塋圖 (Fig 5). The progression from right to left, from the town to the countryside and then finally to the tomb site, produces the solemn effect of a pilgrimage to the past. There is an uncanny similarity between this handscroll and Shitao's other painting, *The Peach Blossom Spring*. An almost identical city gate divides the town of Xinfan and the world of the dead, just as it divided the village within the Peach Blossom Spring and the mundane outside world. Although the painting opens with the human world of Xinfan, the misty atmosphere makes it seem distant and unreal. It is the exuberant countryside that demands the spectator's most attention. For a brief moment, we are with the ancestors as Shitao's painting transports us to the world of the dead.

Both Shitao and the Fei family knew that the painting was not just a token of orthodox filial piety. Beyond being a legitimate moral statement, there was an emotional quality to the painting that grew out of the intermingling of two personal histories. Shitao's painting did not just passively respond to the Fei family history. It was steeped in the painter's own experience. In Shitao's poem inscription in the painting, he revealed his complete identification with the Feis with this line: "He fled his devastated home like an orphan in winter". Here, Shitao was clearly alluding to his own fate as an orphan prince.

The interaction between life and art did not stop here. The emotional power Shitao's handscroll conveyed was so strong that it prompted Fei Xihuang to go on the pilgrimage that his father and grandfather had never made. He did indeed journey to Sichuan some years after his father's death to pay his respects at the ancestral tombs. Here are the last few lines from a poem written during his pilgrimage:

Half covered in grass, it shines with morning dew,
Entangled with shrubbery and creepers.
Nearby families are astonished at my return,
Women and children peer at the man from the distant east.
Ten thousand li to pour a single cup of wine,
And sprinkle water on the roots of a withered tree. (Hay 2001: 63)

Fei Xihuang's poem brings us back to the encounter scene in Shitao's other handscroll, *The Peach Blossom Spring*, which was mostly likely painted after *The Ancestral Tombs of the Fei Family* but before Fei Xihuang's Sichuan journey. It is now evident that Shitao had the Fei family in mind when he painted his *Peach Blossom Spring*, and the village he depicted in the painting might well have been his vision of the Fei's ancestral home.

We begin to see an engrossing intertextual relationship between Shitao's painting and Fei Xihuang's writing, which ran parallel to the intermingling of their respective family histories. In a prose piece written during his Sichuan journey, Fei Xihuang recounted his visit to White Deer Village, where his family had taken refuge:

In the past Zhongchang Tong (179-219) wrote an Essay on Happiness and Tao Yuanming (365-427) a Record of the Peach Blossom Spring, but both described fictional paradises that did not really exist. White Deer Cliff is the kind of place that those two gentlemen dreamed of without ever actually seeing. When my family was caught up in the chaos, it took refuge here. The other refugee families, the Zhaos, the Yangs, the Yins, are all distantly related to my own. When I arrived they were all overjoyed: "A descendant of the Fei family has come!" they cried. I listened to the elders as they talked of how they had fled together and assembled here seventy years ago. Now that one of the Feis can be seen again, the women peep out from behind curtains and children line up at the sides. In the evening I was served beans to go with the wine; a fire was lit to throw some light, and we talked warmly all through the night. The joy of returning to one's home was never greater than that night. I heard, too, that when the ten thousand peach trees blossom, their petals fall into the flowing water and sometimes reach the outside world. How could the Peach Blossom Spring be any better than this? (Hay 2001: 64)

Literature's capacity to weave beautiful memories out of wretched material is inexhaustible. The Sichuan utopia of the Fei family imagination here merges with Tao Qian's utopian vision. Together, they provide the context for Shitao's painting of the Peach Blossom Spring, which captures that precious yet fleeting moment of return to one's ancestral home. Shitao's Peach Blossom Spring recasts the vision of utopia on a personal and deeply emotional plane, and demonstrates once again that the power of this familiar motif lies in its capacity for linking the private and the public, the personal and the political, the self and the state – the dynamics of which not only drove Tao Qian's original narrative but also animated much of the later literati literature and art.

An orphan prince who lived under foreign rule, a Buddhist monk who turned secular and then Daoist, an iconoclastic artist who wavered between literati and popular cultures, Shitao used many different names and guises to match his chameleon-like painting style. According to Jonathan Hay, a correlation exists between Shitao's self-identity and his creative life, and his "nomadic" existence served to intensify the sense of self-representation in his painting:

Shitao was never securely in any one place: He was always on the verge of slipping into another name, another method, another social role. Though he came close to naming himself openly as Zhu Ruoji at the end of his life, he never quite did, and there were those who doubted his claim to princely status. As obsessive as he was in his self-reference – no other painter had ever said “I” to quite this degree, with quite this consistency or outsider’s need – the self-reference nonetheless was always mobile. (Hay 2001: 2)

Hay’s emphasis on self-reference, or expressing the “I” through painting, is a central idea in his study of Shitao in relation to painting and modernity in early Qing China. If saying the “I” through painting is a hallmark of visual modernity, one could perhaps argue that germinations of this “modern” sensibility were also present in the literati paintings of the Song and the Yuan. However, Shitao was arguably the first major painter whose self expression through painting was no longer confined to quiet philosophical contemplation; it had the urgency of an identity crisis brought on by difficult personal and historical circumstances. Without a secure identity based on family and social relations, Shitao had to create an identity through art. This creative urge lent a strong autobiographical colouring to much of his work. Seldom does the work of a classical Chinese painter carry a stronger and more complex autobiographical imprint than Shitao’s. His dual role as a literati artist and a professional painter forced him to reconcile his own ideal of self-representation with customer demands and popular tastes. In paintings such as *The Ancestral Tombs of the Fei Family* and *The Peach Blossom Spring*, Shitao maximised painting’s capacity to visualise memories and experiences, those of others and his own.

A return to tradition: Zhang Daqian’s Peach Blossom Spring

Attesting to the longevity and continued relevance of *Taoyuan tu* is its manifestation in twentieth-century Chinese painting, including one by Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899–1983), the painter who exemplified the link between the classical and the modern in Chinese painting. Beneath the aura of a world-famous artist, Zhang’s private life had been one of perpetual exile and displacement. Born in Sichuan in 1899, Zhang left China for Hong Kong after the Communist takeover. He subsequently moved to South America in 1953 and settled in Brazil. After 16 years living in Brazil, he moved to Carmel, California, and lived there for seven years. He finally “returned home” to Taiwan, where he was welcomed as a celebrity. Until his death in 1983, he had never returned to China.

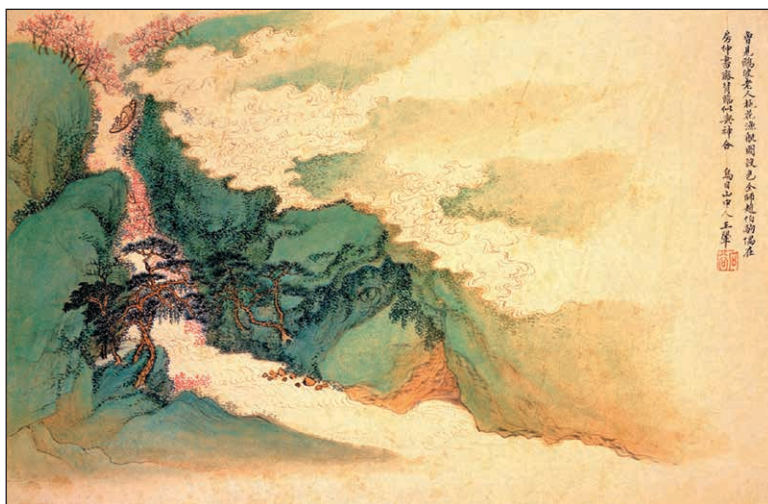
A noteworthy detail about Zhang Daqian’s expatriate life in Brazil is that, in 1954, he bought a farm and named it Ba-de Garden 八德園. Treating it as a canvas, he created a Chinese-style home with gardens, ponds and hills. It is believed that he often modelled his paintings on the scenery at his Brazilian retreat. This was his own Peach Blossom Spring, although a dislocated one that was abandoned after 16 years.

Zhang Daqian’s *Peach Blossom Spring* (Fig 6) was painted during the final year of his life, 1983, when he was living in Taiwan. The work belies his reputation as a



Figure 6 (left): Zhang Daqian (1899-1983), *Peach Blossom Spring*, 1983. Hanging scroll, ink and pigment on paper. 209.1 x 92.4 cm. Private collection.

Figure 7 (below): Wang Hui (1632-1717), *The Peach Blossom Fishing Boat*. Album leaf, ink and pigment on paper, 28.5 x 43 cm. Palace Museum, Taipei.



maverick artist. There is bold, semi-abstract use of splashed ink and blue-and-green pigment in the middle and background, but dominating the foreground are the familiar icons of *Taoyuan tu*: cliffs, stream, fishing boat and blossoming peach trees. The overall atmosphere evoked is that of a mythical paradise. Zhang's *Peach Blossom Spring* brings to mind a painting on the same theme by Wang Hui 王翬 (1632-1717), entitled *The Peach Blossom Fishing Boat* (Fig 7), which is composed with the requisite vocabulary of *Taoyuan tu*. The atmosphere is decidedly mythical and paradisiacal. What is conspicuously lacking, in both paintings, is any real concern with the world within the Peach Blossom Spring – the inaccessibility heightens its mystique, and the journeying towards it is itself the reward. This philosophical approach no doubt belongs to the larger *Taoyuan tu* tradition that Wang Hui inherited from his predecessors. Indeed, Wang Hui openly acknowledged in his inscription that his scroll was a copy of another painting of the same title by the Yuan Dynasty artist Zhao Mengfu.

We cannot ascertain whether or not Zhang Daqian modelled his Peach Blossom Spring after Wang Hui's or one by another early master. However, it is evident that he internalised and synthesised the visual vocabulary of the *Taoyuan tu* tradition, which he employed in his painting. This Peach Blossom Spring may not have been Zhang's most innovative work, nor does it particularly stand out from the long roster of paintings on this theme. Perhaps what is of interest here is precisely why an innovative artist chose to resort to convention late in his career. Describing Zhang Daqian as both a "luminous modernist" and a "re-robed traditionalist", Li-ling Hsiao and David A. Ross argue that the most unassuming of Zhang's images can be "rife with veiled propositions about metaphysics, religion, and politics" and may contain "both an autobiographical gist and a philosophical summation". (Xiao & Ross 2011: 87) There are strong reasons for us not to dismiss Zhang's Peach Blossom Spring too quickly as yet another worn example of the long *Taoyuan tu* tradition.

When Zhang Daqian painted his Peach Blossom Spring, he was also working on a giant mural painting, entitled *Panorama of Mount Lu*, which he had never finished. As an artist who had roamed the world most of his life before finally returning to Chinese-speaking Taiwan, Zhang Daqian invested his last creative energy in painting two traditional Chinese scenes that were thematically intertwined: one was the mythical paradise derived from Tao Qian's muted and yet eloquent call for peace and tranquility, the other a scenic site immortalised by numerous Chinese paintings and poems over the centuries, near the very location where Tao Qian physically resided in retirement.

Although already in Taiwan, Zhang Daqian was not quite home. Separated from this island by a narrow strait, a different political system and a different modern history, the Chinese mainland was where Zhang Daqian's spiritual and artistic origins lay. Both his final projects pointed to that same direction. Both resorted to memory, expressing the same longing. Mount Lu, with its concrete existence and its inaccessibility, was no less potent a token of nostalgia than the ethereal Peach Blossom Spring.

To explain why Zhang Daqian chose to paint the Peach Blossom Spring towards the end of his life, and why he modelled his version after the earlier masters, we must first consider why the Peach Blossom Spring has entered the repertoire of nearly every

major painter since the Ming Dynasty. Perhaps the theme, with its noble idealism, its preference for idyllic simplicity, and its nostalgic sensibility, has so captured the Chinese imagination that it achieved a mythical status, and it has come to symbolise a certain “Chinese-ness” that might rise above or overcome political division. On one hand, Zhang Daqian’s Peach Blossom Spring was an act of homage to a long and venerable Chinese pictorial tradition, out of a desire to inhabit it rather than demolish it. On the other hand, the painting was a powerful expression of his unrequited desire for a lost home, both physically and spiritually. Therefore, Zhang’s *Taoyuan tu* is at once a reprisal of a classical painting tradition and a poignant commentary on modern Chinese history.

Chinese utopia gone global: Xu Bing’s installations

Xu Bing’s installation, *Travelling to the Wonderland* (Victoria & Albert Museum, London, Nov. 2013 – Mar. 2014), (hereafter V&A) exemplifies the latest visual manifestation of Tao Qian’s utopian vision by a contemporary artist (Fig 8). Occupying the site of the V&A’s John Madejski Garden, the multi-media installation is a stylised Chinese landscape intended as physical embodiment of the Peach Blossom Spring. A circular rock formation surrounding a body of water, decorated with artificial peach blossom branches and miniature ceramic houses, cows, monkeys, zebras, flamingos, origami cranes and copulating human couples, Xu Bing’s Peach Blossom Spring resembles a large-scale bonsai, or a condensed Suzhou garden. Enhancing the classical elements with LCD screens, sound, mist and lighting effects, the artist aims to “bring Chinese ink painting to life in a three-dimensional sensory experience” (Singh 2014).

In the artist’s statement and in various interviews, Xu Bing claims that a philosophy of “working in harmony with nature” underpins much of Chinese art, especially landscape painting. He sees his *Travelling to the Wonderland* as a much-needed revisiting of that philosophy amidst the social and environmental crises that the world faces today. (Xu 2013) Yet one cannot help but noting the ironic contrast between Xu Bing’s evocation of Peach Blossom Spring-like idyllic simplicity and the technological sophistication, elaborate scale, and indeed material excess of this work. Media reports make a selling point of the fact that the stones used in the installation are collected from five different regions in China, and that the miniature ceramic houses are all handmade in Jingdezhen and designed to reflect different styles of housing in different Chinese provinces (Whittaker 2013). The work’s material excess is further compounded by a surfeit of labour that went into its making. In video footage showcasing the creative process of the work, we see large teams of assistants lifting, cutting, polishing and installing the rocks with assorted machinery, under the artist’s close supervision.

Xu Bing does not deny or disguise the labour-and-capital intensive nature of this work, accepting such material conditions that define his practice as a highly successful contemporary artist in the world today. His art is famous for challenging the viewers’ first impression by showing them something that turns out to be not what it seems. This play on construction and representation permeates his dialogue with traditional Chinese culture, most notably in his *Book from the Sky* and *Background Story* installations (Harrist 2011). *Travelling to the Wonderland* is characteristically playful with construction and representation. The installation is painstakingly mimetic in its material



Figure 8: Xu Bing. *Travelling to the Wonderland*, 2013. Mixed media installation: stone, clay, mist, light and sound effect, LCD screen. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

execution, but the idea behind this material construction – the story of Peach Blossom Spring itself – is elusive and ephemeral. As if to deflate any possibility of identification with a thing of the past, Xu Bing allows glimpses of hidden machines and cables from certain angles. This slippage, as Xiaolin Li has observed, reminds the audience that this Peach Blossom Spring, this “wonderland”, was ultimately un-real and unattainable, in spite of the technological and material means available to us today (2013).

The English title, *Travelling to the Wonderland*, seems to give in to the breezy consumerism of world travel with a Disneyesque destination. Yet it would be oversimplification to label Xu Bing’s work as a postmodern simulacrum of a Chinese pictorial tradition. The occasion for the creation of this work suggests more serious intentions and deeper layers of relationship with Chinese tradition. The work was commissioned to coincide with the V&A’s exhibition “Masterpieces of Chinese Painting 700 – 1900”, which also opened in November 2013. In addition, the installation in the John Madejski Garden was accompanied by a display of works on paper by Xu Bing in the T.T. Tsui Gallery. These included one of his large-scale New English Calligraphy pieces, based on *Taohuayuan ji*, Tao Qian’s original tale of the Peach Blossom Spring. Also on display were paintings representing Xu Bing’s vision of *Taohuayuan* and sketches detailing the process of creating the garden installation. These meticulous layers of context and frames of reference surrounding the installation, as well as the slippage in the execution of the installation, point to the artificial nature of the work, but at the same time accentuate the intentionality behind its construction. By visually and materially playing on the real and the unreal, Xu Bing brings out the paradox that has been at the core of Tao Qian’s utopian vision and gives it a modern spin: homeward longing has always been coloured with utopian sentiments and in our world now as in Tao Qian’s world then, natural simplicity itself can be a costly construction.



Figure 9: Xu Bing, *Tao Hua Yuan: A Lost Village Utopia*, 2014. Chatsworth, UK.

Travelling to the Wonderland has gone through two more iterations since its debut at the V&A. Retitled as *Tao Hua Yuan: A Lost Village Utopia*, it was a centrepiece of the Sotheby's Beyond Limits sculpture exhibition at Chatsworth, Derbyshire, in 2014 (Fig 9). Set against the formal hedges and the majestic country house of Chatsworth, the installation/public sculptural work occupied a body of water, the normal location of the famous Sea Horse Fountain, which had been temporarily removed for restoration. The Chatsworth installation had a more subdued, minimalist feel than its debut version at the V&A. Artistic merit notwithstanding, the work, being a part of Sotheby's selling exhibition, attracted more attention for its commercial value. The installation itself, though by definition site-specific, was available for purchase. And, as *The Telegraph* bluntly put it, "the choice of a Chinese artist for such a prominent position in the exhibition is likely to prove popular with paying visitors", and "visitors from China spend on average four times more than tourists from other countries" (Singh 2014). Thus the mixed context of this installation, like the work itself, also walks an ambiguous line between fine art and commercial (re)production.

In his attempt at a postmodern interpretation of Tao Qian's "Peach Blossom Spring", Wang Ning states, quite without cynicism, that the contemporary relevance of "The Peach Blossom Spring" lies in the fact that the tale can be "easily read in an allegorical way as a Third World text, starting from which Western people could reflect

on its own culture” (1997: 218). At first glance, the two UK versions of Xu Bing’s Peach Blossom Spring installation seem like a perfect illustration of this view, one that peddles the ancient wisdom of the Orient as a salve to modern ailments of the West, in a visually appealing and easily digestible manner. Considering the choice of sites for his two UK installations, both with strong associations of empire and power, one might argue that Xu Bing was engaged in a form of self-orientalisation, although one of the knowing, winking kind. But that is not the end of the story.

With a twist laden with irony, Xu Bing’s Peach Blossom Spring finally saw its “return” to Chinese soil with its third installation in 2016. The site was the Beijing Olympic Water Park. This massive manmade backdrop is a far cry from Tao Qian’s rustic simplicity, albeit promising a different Chinese utopian vision for the new millennium. The installation was co-sponsored by a mixed brigade of artistic and commercial entities, including Beautiful Asset, Xu Bing Studio, Unrestrained Art Makers, Beijing Olympic Water Park, and Beijing Jing Ende Kai Investment Management Company Limited.

Unlike the two UK versions that created beautiful, exotic illusions against iconic landmarks of the former British empire inviting Orientalist or Post-Colonial readings, the Chinese version looks decidedly more down-to-earth and “realist” in its execution (Fig 10). The rock formation does not circle a pool of pristine water, as at the V&A and Chatsworth, but a pocket of dry ground, with the lawn broken up and tilled in a way that suggests subsistence farming or communal gardening. A knowing departure also takes place in the Chinese title of the piece, with a direct reference to the “Peach Blossom Spring” and an impassioned, quasi-revolutionary call to realise that dream (Taohua yuan de lixiang yiding yao shixian 桃花源 的理想一定要实现). As “Taohua yuan”, in Chinese, is synonymous with a dream that cannot be realised, this juxtaposition gives an empty ring to the revolutionary plea. The insertion of the particle ‘de’ in romanised letters into the Chinese title – a tongue-in-cheek imitation of hybridised language use popular on Chinese Internet – further punctures the seriousness of any genuine revolutionary fervour. As Zhang Wenzhi has pointed out, the linguistic and conceptual paradox in the title creates a visual tension stimulating our thinking, reminding us of the gap between ideal and reality (2016).

Situated in the long tradition of visual re-imaginings of the Peach Blossom Spring, Xu Bing’s installation at once revives and betrays Tao Qian’s utopian vision. Part visual spectacle, part philosophical contemplation, Xu Bing’s rock-and-plastic rendition of the Peach Blossom Spring mixes kitsch with serious-minded high art. Whilst commenting on traditional landscape and sense of place affected by media technology and globalisation, it also highlights the fact that contemporary uses of the past continue to complicate and invigorate Chinese modernity. Whereas Shitao’s and Zhang Daqian’s Peach Blossom Springs continued along a pictorial tradition by reusing and updating a visual iconography from the past, Xu Bing recontextualises a local (Chinese) visual iconography in deliberately chosen global and transnational environments. The once-lost Chinese utopia is now not only recovered, recreated, and reclaimed as contemporary art; it is also transported, exported, re-imported, put on prominent display for public consumption, and indeed, available for private purchase. Crossing temporal, spatial and conceptual boundaries, Xu Bing’s Peach Blossom Spring oscillates between self-orientalisation and Chinese triumph in the global system of contemporary art.



Figure 10: Xu Bing, *Taohua yuan de lixiang yiding yao shixian* 桃花源 的理想一定要实现, 2016. The Olympic Water Park, Beijing.

The Peach Blossom Spring and Chinese Visual Modernity

The Peach Blossom Spring paintings provide an illuminating case study which enables us to trace the subtle shifts in the long history of Chinese visual art, particularly how artists responded to tradition, both as a concept and as a body of accumulated images. And it is in the sense of how different artists responded to tradition that the Peach Blossom Spring might be usefully linked with the discussion of Chinese visual modernity. Shitao, Zhang Daqian and Xu Bing's respective visual representations of the Peach Blossom Spring are manifestations of Chinese visual modernity, each revealing a distinctive way of relating to tradition while responding to the changes and necessities of its historical and cultural conditions. In this sense, the Peach Blossom Spring can be seen as an open metaphor for 'tradition' or 'Chinese tradition', and each artistic rendering highlights different aspects of Chinese visual modernity.

Shitao might be considered a painter that came at the tail end of the literati tradition, or he could be one of the first modern painters, as Jonathan Hay would argue. Shitao's Peach Blossom Spring breaks free from a staid, repetitive pictorial tradition of *Taoyuan tu* paintings depicting paradisiacal scenes, and injects it with deeply personal meaning, turning Tao Qian's utopia from an unattainable ideal to an irretrievable past. Zhang Daqian's Peach Blossom Spring pays homage to the same *Taoyuan tu* tradition that Shitao subtly rejected. Remaining reverential to traditional iconography, Zhang's *Taoyuan tu* is made poignant by his perpetual longing for home whilst living a life of exile – a longing also expressed through his obsession with Chinese gardens (Bade Yuan) and iconic Chinese landscapes (Mount Lu). He brings us back to the original question: does the Peach Blossom Spring actually exist; and if so, where? Xu Bing continues with this question and makes it more explicit, whilst extending it beyond China by asking it on a global scale: is the Peach Blossom Spring metaphorical or actual? And why should it not be actual or actualised? Xu's intervention comes from his focus on the public, social and political dimensions of the Peach Blossom Spring by insisting on recreating and reconfiguring a utopian ideal. Like Shitao and Zhang Daqian, he too departs from the mythical, paradisiacal vein of the *Taoyuan tu* tradition and returns it to a complex network of (global) social realities.

Wu Hung identifies five ways of “internalizing tradition”, a range of strategies that contemporary Chinese artists have deployed in their “conversation with tradition” – analytical transformation, distilling materiality, translating visuality, refiguration, and image appropriation. (Wu 2014: 331) Xu Bing’s “conversation with tradition” in his earlier works can be understood in one category or another — Wu Hung describes *Book from the Sky* and *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* as typical examples of “analytical transformation”; *Background Story* fits well with Wu Hung’s definition of “translating visuality”. However, Xu’s Peach Blossom Spring does not seem to fall neatly into any category. Xu’s visual representation of a classical Chinese text, in an emphatically ahistorical, transnational context, clearly suggests an ambitious “analytical transformation”; his use of physical material and his configuration of the Peach Blossom Spring as a miniature Chinese garden, or a super-sized bonsai, could also be understood as forms of “distilling materiality”, or “translating visuality”, or “refiguration”. If there is any common ground that is shared by all these threads of “conversations with tradition”, it is a double-edged critical stance towards both tradition and modernity itself. Conversations with tradition, according to Wu Hung, must either render traditional forms meaningless or exposes its limitations, or use traditional forms from the past to critique the present. Xu Bing’s Peach Blossom Spring leans towards the latter, gentler and more hopeful, form of critique, one that turns Chinese tradition into a source of cultural capital in the operations of a globalised contemporary art world.

Glossary

Bade yuan	八德園
Lushan	廬山
Shitao	石濤
Taohua yuan ji	桃花源記
Taoyuan tu	桃源圖
Tao Qian	陶潛
Xu Bing	徐冰
Zhang Daqian	張大千

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