

"PEACH BLOSSOM SPRING"
By Tao Qian

Introduction

Tao Qian (T'ao Ch'ien, or Tao Yuanming, 376-427 CE) was a man of the southern part of China during the time of the Eastern Jin dynasty (317-420) and its successor state, the Liu Song (420-479), during the period in which China was divided between northern and southern dynasties. The years between the final collapse of the Han dynasty in 220 CE and the Sui dynasty's reunification of north and south in 589 were characterized by warfare and instability. The rulers and elite of the south were tortured by the loss of the north to various non-Chinese (mostly Turkic) rulers. In both north and south, one ruling house succeeded another. It was in this context of instability that Tao Qian, an official, scholar, and poet, wrote his famous essay, "Peach Blossom Spring."

Complete Document with Questions

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

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

Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on "PEACH BLOSSOM SPRING," BY TAO QIAN

Some, noticing the fisherman, started in great surprise and asked him where he had come from. He told them his story. They then invited him to their home, where they set out wine and killed chickens for a feast. When news of his coming spread through the village everyone came in to question him. For their part they told how their forefathers, fleeing from the troubles of the age of Ch'in, had come with their wives and neighbours to this isolated place, never to leave it. From that time on they had been cut off from the outside world. They asked what age was this: they had never even heard of the Han, let alone its successors the Wei and the Chin. The fisherman answered each of their questions in full, and they sighed and wondered at what he had to tell. The rest all invited him to their homes in turn, and in each house food and wine were set before him. It was only after a stay of several days that he took his leave.

"Do not speak of us to the people outside," they said. But when he had regained his boat and was retracing his original route, he marked it at point after point; and on reaching the prefecture he sought audience of the prefect and told him of all these things. The prefect immediately despatched officers to go back with the fisherman. He hunted for the marks he had made, but grew confused and never found the way again.

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

[Translated by Cyril Birch]

Questions:

1. What does the essay reveal about the author's state of mind?
2. Are there any parallels to this essay in other cultures?
3. Under what circumstances would Chinese in the centuries after Tao Qian's time refer to this essay in their writing?
4. Consider the long term of Chinese history — in what historical periods do you think men would be most likely to identify with the author and refer to this piece of writing in their prose or poetry?