

The Ethical Representations and Enlightenments of “Peach Blossom Spring” in Contemporary Literature

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Abstract *Peach Blossom Spring* has always been the ideal paradise for all the Chinese writers for thousands of years. The image of “Peach Blossom Spring” has become the collective memory of Chinese people. Many writers use “Peach Blossom Spring” as a prototype to express their pursuits and dream of ethical values. Shen Congwen is one of the outstanding representatives. He creates a beautiful and harmonious world called Xiangxi (West Hunan) for the readers, and the beauty of nature and humanity demonstrated in that world become the ethical representations of *Peach Blossom Spring* in contemporary literature. Generally, this article aims to analyze the functions of “Peach Blossom Spring” from the perspective of ethical literary criticism. It intends to explore new insights into the ethical representations of “Peach Blossom Spring” in contemporary literature and to further discuss its enlightenments to the current society.

Key words “Peach Blossom Spring”; *Border Town*; nature; humanity; ethical representations

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The utopian ideal for a better life is a universal theme both in the eastern and western literature. “The idea of utopia suggests the vision of an alternative and better society beyond reality, and it implies some degree of discontent with the status quo and its critique, therefore the utopian vision invariably presents itself as a social commentary, an allegory of the desire for change and transformation” (Zhang 1). The ideals of utopian society can be found in the western literature such as the biblical Garden of Eden, Plato’s *Republic* and so on. The most famous version in China is put forward by Tao Yuanming in his *Peach Blossom Spring*. As an outstanding poet of the Six Dynasties, Tao Yuanming’s influence has pervaded the whole history of Chinese literature and he has been characterized as “the paragon of all hermit poets, past and present.” His *Peach Blossom Spring* become the representative work expressing people’s yearning for a better life.

Nie Zhenzhao states that “the main purpose of literature is to express the ethics and morals of the author and the age” (Nie 8). In this sense, every literary work is related to ethics and can be interpreted from the perspective of ethical literary criticism; *Peach Blossom Spring* is no exception. “Ethical literary criticism is a theory and methodology for reading, interpreting, understanding, analyzing and evaluating literature from an ethical standpoint. It argues that literature is a historically contingent presentation of ethics and morality and that reading literature helps human beings to reap moral enlightenment and thus make better ethical choices. The mission of ethical literary criticism is to uncover the ethical value of literature” (Ross 8). *Peach Blossom Spring* makes up a peaceful and ideal society which is in opposite to the cruel reality. “The essential element in utopia is not hope, but desire — the desire for a better way of being” (Levitas 191). Tao Yuanming’s description of a happy life reveals the ethical pursuits and the wishes of the masses.

1. The Origins of *Peach Blossom Spring*

“Tao Yuanming’s thought is not formed by a certain single factor, it is influenced by the combination of his unique character, social backgrounds and the essence of various academic schools” (Liu 202). Therefore, the origins of “*Peach Blossom Spring*” are not out of the fancy, or the fabrication of Tao Yuanming. It takes shape on the basis of social backgrounds, ethical environment of that time and Tao Yuanming’s own expectations.

1.1 The Social Backgrounds of *Peach Blossom Spring*

Tao Yuanming lives in a turbulent time with frequent wars, dark politics and heavy taxes. People suffer a lot in the predicaments. Involved in the period of great turmoil, Tao Yuanming sees no hopes of achieving his ambition of salvaging his people and country and he feels the darkness and corruption of politics only get farther and farther into the swamp of awkwardness. “He has no ability to put wrongs to rights or to associate with evil trends” (Liu 202), so he chooses to withdraw from the society and live in solitude. Experiencing the harshness and toughness of the farm work, he decides to find out the outlets for the impoverished masses and imagines an ideal “Peach Blossom Spring” without exploitations or oppressions. This ideal society forms a striking contrast to the dark society of the time, which enables people to further realize the hideous social reality. “Peach Blossom Spring” refers to the most beautiful and wonderful paradise in the world. “Sealed from the vicissitudes of history, the inhabitants have preserved their ingenuous mode of life in which all work in readiness and harmony” (Kwong 50). With this regard, Tao Yuanming in *Peach Blossom Spring* expresses his condemnation of the depressive society and his desire for a better society, as Yim-tze Kwong says: “the poet’s endorsement of such a hermetic society only reflects his anguish at the inaccessibility of what should be universally accessible, and it is not without a twinge of sadness that he expresses a wish to become an inhabitant of this ideal land” (Kwong 50). Although the wonderland depicted in *Peach Blossom Spring* is impossible to exist, the tranquility and happiness of that ideal society provides a hopeful shelter for all the miserable masses.

1.2 The Ethical Environment of *Peach Blossom Spring*

The origin of “Peach Blossom Spring” is not only related to the social backgrounds, but also is closely related to the ethical environment of that time. Six Dynasties are indeed an era of political upheaval on the one hand; on the other hand, it is also an era of thought liberation. The fusion and integration of different nations promote the communication and the spread of various ideas. As the representative of intellectuals, Tao Yuanming makes up his own ideal society by means of absorbing the essence of previous thoughts and ethical spirits of his time. Tao Yuanming is an extremely wise thinker who does not just stick to the traditional ideas. He reads various books and makes contact with various people of different academic schools. He is under the deep influence of the multiple ideas, including both Confucianism and Taoism.

Tao Yuanming’s ideal society has certain similarities with the Great Unity

Society advocated by Confucianism: “men loved not only their own parents nor fostered their own children, but ensured that the aged were provided for, the able-bodied employed, and the young brought up. Widowers, widows, orphans, childless people, as well as the disabled, robbery and disorder never occurred, so that outer doors need not be closed” (Kwong 51). This corresponds to the descriptions of the carefree life in *Peach Blossom Spring*: “There was an expansive plain scattered with orderly houses, lush fields, beautiful ponds and clumps of mulberry and bamboo trees. Footpaths crisscrossed the fields, where the crowing of cocks and the barking of dogs were heard within distance. The men and women working in the fields were attired in the same manner as the people living outside; both old and young enjoyed a happy life” (Tao 163). In this sense, we can see Tao Yuanming has generous visions of making everyone happy and in the Great Unity Society.

Besides Confucianism, Tao Yuanming is also influenced by Taoism. One remarkable feature of “Peach Blossom Spring” is its complete isolation from the outside world. This is similar to the idea of “keeping the country small and population sparse” advocated by Laozi who is the representative of Taoism. Just like Tao Yuanming, Laozi also lives in a turbulent era. In pain and despair, he tries hard to seek his utopia by establishing an isolated world. “The rustic community in Tao Yuanming’s story does bear considerable resemblance to the utopian vision in Chapter Eighty of the *Daodejing* (attributed to Laozi) in that an ideal state should be small in size, simple in organization, its inhabitants living happily in ignorance of and isolation from the rest of the world” (Chiang 115). The ideal society advocated by Taoism can be articulated in details: Reduce the size of the state; Lessen the population. Make sure that even though there are labor-saving tools, they are never used. Make sure that they look upon death as a weighty matter and never move to distant places. Even though they have ships and carts, they will have no use for them. Even though they have armor and weapons, they will have no reason to deploy them. Make sure that the people return to the use of the knotted cord. Make their food savory, their clothes fine, their houses comfortable, their lives happy (Ivanhoe 202). This description also corresponds to the descriptions in *Peach Blossom Spring*, the villagers “told him how their ancestors had arrived at this remote corner of the world together with their wives, children and fellow villagers in order to escape from the tyrannous rule of the Qin Dynasty, and how they had settled down here, cutting themselves off from the rest of the world. When the fisherman asked them what dynasty they were living in, they were ignorant of the Han Dynasty, let alone the Wei and Jin dynasties” (Tao 163,165). Taoism again strengthens Tao Yuanming’s determination of finding a harmonious and pure

paradise in the troublous time.

In addition to the influence of Confucianism and Taoism, Tao Yuanming inherits from the theory of “no monarch” as well, for without rulers everything falls into place; without officials every matter proceeds in order; with rulers oppression arises; with officials robbery comes about. Tao Yuanming’s assumption of the ideal society has nothing to do with monarch or hierarchy, but presents a nice scene that everyone is equal and lives peacefully.

1.3 Tao Yuanming’s Personal Expectations of *Peach Blossom Spring*

Tao Yuanming’s expectations of *Peach Blossom Spring* derive from his love for nature. For Tao Yuanming who is claimed as “the son of nature”, nature not only provides a necessary place to live in, but also a spiritual home which gives humans a sense of belonging.

“I’ve loathed the madding crowd since I was a boy, while hills and mountains have filled me with joy. By mistake I sought mundane careers and got entrapped in them for thirty years. Birds in the cage would long for wooded hills, Fish in the pond would yearn for flowing rills. So I reclaim the land in southern fields, To suit my bent for reaping farmland yields. My farm contains a dozen mu of ground; My cottage has eight or nine rooms around. The elm and willow screen the backside eaves which peach and plum trees shade my yard with leaves. The distant village dimly looms somewhere, with smoke from chimneys drifting in the air. In silent country lanes a stray dog barks; Amid the mulberry trees cocks crow with larks. My house escapes from worldly moil or gloom while ease and quiet permeates my private room. When I escape from bitter strife with men. I live a free and easy life again” (Tao 53). Tao Yuanming shows his aversion to the secular world and his attachment to nature. The beauty of nature presents a striking contrast to the darkness of social realities. It is nature that can make him happy and contented.

“Homeward ho! Why not return now that my fields will go into weeds? Since I took up a position against my will, There is no need for me to lament by myself. I have realized that there is no remedy for the past, But there is still a future lying ahead. It is true that I was not far astray in my way, Realizing that I have turned from wrong to right. My returning boat is sailing swiftly over the water while the gentle breeze tosses my robe. I ask a traveler about the way ahead, Resenting the dimness before dawn. When my house comes into sight, I run towards it in a happy mood. My servants are giving me a warm welcome; My children are waiting at the door. Wild weed have grown on the courtyard paths. But the pine trees and chrysanthemums remain. When I enter the house hand in hand with my young

son, I see that the cups are filled with wine. I pour wine from the jug and drink by myself, Elated to watch the trees in the courtyard. I lean against the southern window in pride, Complacent with the narrow house I dwell. It is a pleasure for me to pace the yard, With the gate closely shut all day long. With a staff in hand, I walk to and fro, Raising my head to look afar from behind the hills; The weary birds know that they should return. When the dim sun is about to set in the west, I fondle a solitary pine and linger around it” (Tao 245). Through the descriptions of the beautiful natural scenery, Tao Yuanming expresses his deep affection for the natural world. Strolling in the paradise of nature, he can be released from the turbulent society and gradually have a sense of inner peace.

For thousands of years, Tao Yuanming’s deep love for nature has caught great attention of the later generations. Luo Zongqiang says: “Tao Yuanming is extraordinary because there is no distance between him and nature. He immerses himself completely in the beauty of nature and becomes a part of nature rather than a spectator, an appreciator, nor a possessor” (Luo 343). To sum up, on one hand Tao Yuanming develops his conceptions of the ideal society by absorbing the essence of various thoughts. On the other hand, he combines his thoughts with social realities and the ethical environment. Therefore, Tao Yuanming’s ideal society concerns about two dimensions of nature and people.

2. The Ethical Representations of “Peach Blossom Spring” in Contemporary Literature

Eaglestone also says, “The study of literature has always had a strong involvement with ethics” (Eaglestone 581-82). For thousands of years, *Peach Blossom Spring* has become a classical symbol of a spiritual home for writers in Chinese literary history. When feeling disappointed and distressed, they usually go to the Peach Blossom Spring to comfort themselves. Besides that, *Peach Blossom Spring* also inspires them greatly in their literary creation. “Ethical literary criticism can be used to help readers and learners to get enlightenment, education, instruction, and guidance as they analyze, interpret, comment on, and evaluate literary texts ... It uncovers moral models, both as examples and as warnings. It helps us develop the capacity to think about complex human interactions. The aim of ethical literary criticism is to offer varied experiences, lessons, instructions and inspirations for our learning, teaching and enlightenment” (Ross 14). Therefore, the exploration of the ethical representations of *Peach Blossom Spring* is of great necessity in enhancing the understanding of its significant functions in the current world. *Peach*

Blossom Spring marks the beginning of landscape poetry and pastoral poetry. In Tao Yuanming's works, "the poetic imagery is personified, idealized and artistic; it is the combination of the poet's spiritual world and the poetic world" (Sun 5). Then the subsequent writers like Wangwei, Meng Haoran, Chu Guangxi, Changjian all inherit Tao Yuanming's style. Many descriptions about nature and local customs of the following writers resemble similarities to *Peach Blossom Spring*, and the harmonious relationship between man and nature is also deeply inherited from Tao Yuanming. Tao Yuanming constructs the spiritual world in the pastoral poems, because "there are the more profound taste and permanent values in the natural mountains and waters landscapes" (Sun 26).

Border Town of Shen Congwen is a typical novel under the impact of *Peach Blossom Spring*. Its background is set in a small town called "Chadong" with beautiful sceneries and kind people. The novel demonstrates the goodness of human nature and the purity of human heart through a girl's love story. The readers at home and abroad are fascinated by its artistic charm and vivid depictions. In *Border Town*, Shen Congwen combines the beauty of nature and the beauty of humanity in that tranquil and ideal society, thus creates a harmonious Xiangxi paradise for the readers. "West Hunan's natural beauty and cultural vitality, its 'primitive' nobility and innocence, and its unconventional social mores, open up an imaginary space for his contemporaries to envisage a different kind of China" (Xiao 43). The beauty of nature and the beauty of humanity in Xiangxi paradise are the embodiment of the ethical representations of "Peach Blossom Spring."

2.1 The Beauty of Nature

In Shen Congwen's point of view, beauty is omnipresent, "I love all the living things, because I found beauty in all of them." (Shen 178) This kind of beauty includes the beauty of nature, the beauty of humanity and the beauty of life. He further articulates that "everything depicted in the works of writers should be beautiful. Although ugliness does not necessarily mean evil, it couldn't demonstrate the solemnity of life and make people feel happy" (Shen 363).

Border Town is full of natural beauty with resemblance to the beautiful scenery in the *Peach Blossom Spring*. Shen Congwen is extremely good at imaging and describing beautiful sceneries, "in the beginning of the *Border Town*, he introduces a wonderful place named Chadong to us naturally and skillfully. His descriptions unfold like a painting in front of the readers" (Wang 82). The border town, just like a pair of landscape painting, is indeed the beautiful paradise on earth. "Shen Congwen presents us a natural and enchanting world with his fresh, plain and

enthusiastic language: fascinating landscape, traditional dragon boat festival, delicate stilted building, narrow ferryboat which form a fabulous world.” (Qin 146) The beauty of nature in *Border Town* proves that it is an ideal and holy place for people, to live in “*Border Town* is perhaps Shen’s most idyllic work, paced by the rhythms of the seasons, which are measured out by the annual dragon boat races. The story begins in a seemingly timeless bucolic idyll, where people fulfill their appointed tasks, men are brave and chivalrous, houses are all perfectly placed in harmony with their surroundings, and everyone lived quietly and meditatively, and this silence increased their conception of the power of dreams” (Oakes 104).

2.2 The Beauty of Humanity

The descriptions about the beauty of nature in *Border Town* not only make readers feel delighted and comfortable, but also narrate the pure and virtuous people brought up on that land. “Nature is only the background of people. It is the purity and honesty of humanity which truly inspires and touches Shen Congwen” (Wang 208). As an old saying goes: “each place has its own way of supporting its own inhabitants.” Such beautiful natural sceneries will definitely cultivate and mould people’s temperament. Shen Congwen states that he wants to reveal a kind of life style which is beautiful, healthy and natural. We can find that almost everyone in the novel is upright and honest: loving grandfather, pure girl named Cui Cui, capable brothers and so on. The beauty of nature and the beauty of humanity are in perfect harmony and are the ethical pursuits of Shen Congwen.

Grandfather is a diligent and responsible person whose job is to paddle a ferryboat. He takes up this job throughout his life and never complains about its hardness and laboriousness. Above all, he is a loving grandfather who tries his best to raise his beloved granddaughter Cui Cui. He sincerely hopes that Cui Cui can live a happy life; thus he is preoccupied with one important task which is to choose an appropriate husband for Cui Cui until the end of his life. His deep love for Cui Cui is really touching.

Cui Cui is a pure and simple girl nurtured by nature. “She was as innocent and agile as a young animal. She was as gentle as a mountain antelope, never took thought of cruelty or sorrow, and she was never angry. Whenever she saw a stranger on the ferryboat paying attention to her, she gazed back at him with bright eyes, as if she could escape into the hills whenever she liked” (Oakes 105). Besides that, she is also an independent and courageous girl who shoulder the responsibilities after the death of his grandfather. As for love, she firmly seek for her true love with longing and hope.

The two brothers are diligent and capable of doing business from a very young age, and they never look down upon others for their favorable family background. Later, they fall in love with Cui Cui almost at the same time, but they do not turn against with each other. Rather they truly care about each other and try to find a fair way to win the heart of Cui Cui, which clearly demonstrate their love and attachment to each other.

Jonathan Culler says that “In literary studies, theory was first deployed for thinking about the nature of the critical enterprise and for producing new readings of literary works”(Culler 230). In this sense, reinterpreting *Border Town* from the perspective of ethical literary criticism can generate new ethical meanings for us to think over. So Shen Congwen praises the beauty of humanity in *Border Town*. Through the description of the beauty of nature and the beauty of humanity, Shen Congwen successfully introduces readers to a beautiful and harmonious world in which the residents are sincere and honest and the society is steady.

3. The Ethical Enlightenments of “Peach Blossom Spring”

“Literature is essentially a guidebook for the moral teaching of humanity. Its ethical nature and teaching function are derived from its earliest existence and original aims, which can be aptly demonstrated by a huge number of literary works...The process of reading is closely related to the process of aesthetic appreciation, which serves as an important means of moral enlightenment. In short, moral teaching is the fundamental function of literature” (Ross 9).

The dream of *Peach Blossom Spring* has always been the eternal pursuit for Chinese writers of almost all generations for thousands of years. With the development of society and passing of time, the “Peach Blossom Spring” has new connotations which still greatly inspire and enlighten people in the current society. Specially, the ethical enlightenments of “Peach Blossom Spring” mainly include two aspects: ecological enlightenment and cultural enlightenment.

Peach Blossom Spring and *Border Town* demonstrate the beauty of nature to the readers. The natural environment portrayed by Tao Yuanming and Shen Congwen is not ruined by wars, not polluted by the development of industries and not overexploited by commerce and trade. Everything is plain and natural, “Human and nature are in perfect harmony with each other. Man doesn’t destruct nature, nature also doesn’t punish human” (Gao 80). The harmonious relationship between human and nature is of vital importance for the development of our society. The main reason for the current global environmental crisis is that the relationship between man and nature is not handled appropriately. Environmental issues are

closely related to everyone in the world, and the worsening of environment greatly influences people's life. Besides that "Peach Blossom Spring" enlightens us that we should keep the balance between man and nature and should not demand too much from nature. "Peach Blossom Spring" not only provides ecological enlightenments to people, but also has profound cultural significance. On the one hand, it offers a refuge for people to isolate themselves from the hardship of reality, as Feng Zikai says: "We know the fact that the *Peach Blossom Spring* is illusory and Utopian, but we still like it for it enables us to escape from the reality temporarily." (Feng 179). Meanwhile, "Peach Blossom Spring" has the function of pacifying human's anxiety and sorrow, which in turn will encourage people to face the difficulties and challenges of reality bravely and calmly.

4. Conclusion

"The only end of writing is to enable the readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it" (Johnson 536). Both *Peach Blossom Spring* and *Border Town* give readers a bright outlook in the life. A society that does not include utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the chances at which humanity is always landing and deprives the possibilities of making progress. Zhang Longxi says: "Utopian vision of an ideal society will lead us on, and that with so much experience of failed projects and frustrated expectations, we may just do it better in the future as we build a more open, tolerant, and humane society respectful of individual rights as well as collective interests, a society that will combine the best of the East and the West" (Zhang 19). With the development of modern society, people blindly seek for material gains at all costs which cause many social problems and people's alienation. People lose their own identify and faith in the materialistic society. Therefore, "Peach Blossom Spring" becomes a symbol of the ethical inspiration and it reminds people of sticking to their own value and belief and making unremitting efforts to fulfill the spiritual pursuit.

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