

A Masterpiece of the "Cave" Hermit Novels

-- A Textual Analysis of Peach Blossoms Spring

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Abstract

Tao Yuanming's "Peach Blossom Spring" originated in Wei and Jin dynasties when seclusion was prevalent. It tells a story about seclusion, involving the subject, method and environment of seclusion. In terms of content, it possesses the three elements of a novel; from the perspective of artistic conception, the reclusive way it chooses is the embodiment of Chinese traditional reclusive culture. Therefore, "cave" reclusive novel is its textual property.

Keywords

Peach Blossom Spring, seclusion, cave, novel.

1. Introduction

The legendary hermits in ancient China such as Chao Fu, Xu You and Shan Juan took mountains and forests as their hidden places. Therefore, since the pre-Qin period, in the traditional hermit culture system, the word "cave" has a special meaning, which represents the reclusive life secluded in mountains and forests, and is constantly showed in literature and art works, such as "poorly concealed in the cave to hide myself" (Dongfang Shuo "Sighing for Bo Yi"), "many hermits in rocky caves" (Ji Kang "Poems of ideas"), "I would like a reclusive life, hide in rocky caves" (Pan Ni "The hum of the carefree"), etc. This "cave" mode became a spatial narrative mode in ancient Chinese hermit poetry.

It is generally believed that "Peach Blossom Spring" is an essay. As a matter of fact, this article originated from the collection of novels "Afterword of Searching Gods" about strange spirits in the Eastern Jin Dynasty signed with the name Tao Yuanming. It can be said that at the beginning of its emergence, it was regarded as a novel of strange spirits in terms of genre. In fact, the theme of "cave" seclusion was very popular in the novels of Wei and Jin dynasties. "The conception of the cave fairyland is the result of the merging of the seclusion thought and the aesthetic taste to mountains and waters into Taoism..." [1], Such as "Immortal Hotel and Jade Pulp", "World in the Cave", "Shao Dance", "Music in the Stone Chamber" in "Afterword of Searching Gods" all belong to this kind of work. "Why did Tao Yuanming love to write cave stories so much? It has always been associated with his idea of seclusion." [2] According to the story, a fisherman lost his way in fishing and finally reached the end of the stream by rocking his boat. At that time, he found a mountain at the source of water, and on the mountain there was a narrow cave which seemingly shone light, and the fisherman followed the light into the mysterious cave. "The trees ended where the water began, there is a mountain with a small opening, as if there were light. He left the boat and entered through its opening." [3] The author's focusing on hermits story in the cave is not accidental, it is an attempt to reproduce the classical cave hermit tradition in the text. It can be seen that as far as the work itself is concerned, in terms of genre, Peach Blossom Spring is a novel which adopts the "cave" mode to narrate the story of seclusion.

2. An Image of A Group of Legendary Hermits

Most of the characters in narrative prose are processed on the basis of real people and events, while most of the characters in novels are fictionalized. The people and events in Peach Blossom Spring are obviously fictionalized by the author. The three elements of the novel include the characters, the plot and the environment (natural environment and social environment). The most basic textual feature of a novel is to depict the characters in depth and detail. The Wei, Jin, and Southern & Northern dynasties were not the mature period for Chinese novels. Most novels in this period were short in length, simple in narration and character images. What the author portrayed was not a single person, but a group -- a group of reclusive figures who stood aloof from the world. They dressed like people outside the seclusion. There both the old and the young seemed to be leisure and enjoyed themselves. With only a few words, the hermits' ethereal spirit has come out, leaving a deep impression for the people. The beginning of the article pointed out that the story took place in Eastern Jin Dynasty during the reign of Emperor Xiaowu in Jin dynasty. A lost fisherman accidentally entered the cave and found a group of people who had moved there at the end of Qin Dynasty. By calculation, more than 500 years have passed. In real life, it is absolutely impossible for a group of people to reproduce and live in the same place for generations without contacting with the outside world. What is more strange is that when the fisherman left Peach Blossom Spring, at that time he had clearly marked his way, but when people went back to look for this place again, it magically disappeared forever into the world. Therefore, the hermits in Peach Blossom Spring have the legendary color which the ordinary hermits do not have.

3. The Elegance and Tranquility of Seclusion Environment

"Peach Blossom Spring" not only depicts a group of reclusive masses far away from the world, but also presents their natural and beautiful living environment with exquisite brushwork. "The reclusive mood of the cave fairy novels is also reflected in the description of people's living conditions." [4] When the fisherman entered the cave, he walked for a while and felt (the sight) "suddenly wide". From a small place to a very bright and spacious place, what the fisherman saw was a good place for live and work: "The land is flat and spacious, the houses are dignified built, there are good fields and beautiful pools with mulberries and bamboos." [5] From the pre-Qin period to the Wei and Jin dynasties, the hermit culture changed greatly with the development of time. Typically, in the pre-Qin period, hermits used caves as a place of retreat. When it came to the Qin and Han dynasties, in daily life, "Most of the hermits in the Qin and Han dynasties were honest and stood on their own feet. They have no special requirements for the living condition, which are relatively simple, crude and primitive, hidden in the streets, downtown and villages,..... Even if they were initiative to live a secluded life in mountain, they were not like later generation hermits who chose beautiful, inspiring land and water to create an elegant environment of landscape and sound.", [6] After Qin and Han dynasties, seclusion began the trend to entertainment. During the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern dynasties, with the prosperity of the southern manor economy, the hermits' choice of seclusion was no longer limited to caves or remote places, and the beautiful scenery became the place where the hermits often went to.

The seclusion environment depicted in the Peach Blossom Spring has the significance of typical seclusion scenery in Wei and Jin dynasties. From the perspective of the large environment, it happened in a cave, still belonging to the "cave" type of seclusion. However, this cave shows different characteristics from previous caves. Because it is no longer a primitive wilderness mountain in pre-Qin period, or a humble place in Qin and Han dynasties. The reclusive places in Wei and Jin dynasties often have charming scenery and comfortable environment. When the fisherman entered the mountains, he saw a beautiful and peaceful world he had never seen

before. The fields are fertile, the pond is crystal clear, and all around are mulberry trees and greenbamboos... This place is not only beautiful in environment, but also convenient in transportation. Fields and paths are crisscross and connected with each other, which are convenient for people to walk on. From these descriptions, it can be seen that the culture of seclusion has changed into an apparent entertainment one.

4. The Self-Sufficient, Reclusive Life

For the hermits in ancient China, the life of seclusion was of great attraction, but there was also a dilemma in reality, that is, the necessary means to sustain life. Traditional Confucianism despised labor, but Tao Yuanming dared to break these taboos. Lu Qinli believed that "Tao Yuanming began farming after the age of 28"[7]. Among his poems, Tao Yuanming wrote 17 pieces directly about rural labor. In an ideal world of seclusion, he thought, hermits would live by labor, everyone worked in the fields, and stood on one's own feet. In fact, Tao Yuanming practiced his own proposition. After resigning from magistrate office of Pengze county for the last time, he lived in seclusion for more than 20 years and never entered official career again. Moreover, unlike other hermits who only regarded the countryside as a part of the poetic reclusive life, Tao Yuanming's seclusion in the countryside was fully integrated into the rural life, and personally he participated in ploughing and farming. Therefore, in Tao Yuanming's idea of seclusion, the countryside is both a paradise for hermits and a place for making a living.

In terms of economy, Tao Yuanming advocated that hermits should stand on their own feet. Hermits in Peach Blossom Spring are ordinary people who need basic living materials to support themselves. Otherwise, if the problem of survival is not solved, the dream of seclusion cannot be realized. "Minimum living standard is even more important for hermits because it is the basic prerequisite for preserving a free, independent personality." [8] In this respect, Tao Yuanming had a profound life experience. In order to support his family, he used to go to public service several times, sacrificing his nature of "loving of the hills" for the survival of himself and his family. Therefore, to turn the dream of seclusion into reality, economic independence is an indispensable condition. Only on the condition that the problem of one's food and clothing has been solved at first, then one could pursue the dream. It could be said that Tao Yuanming's view that the independence of economy is a necessary condition for seclusion is far-sighted. Many hermits through the ages seem to have been ashamed to think about financial resources, the prerequisite for seclusion. It was until Wu Jingzi's Unofficial History of Officialdom in the Qing dynasty made the most sobering judgment on the necessary connection between economy and seclusion: "what we can clearly see is the author's subject posture -- seeking the freedom of individual life. To achieve this goal, at first we must find a fulcrum for this freedom. This is self-supporting, a way of life that does not run for the big family, nor is it the pursuit of fame and fortune, but the pursuit of self-respect, love and independence. It's a kind of civic liberalism.", [9] According to Maslow's theory of human needs hierarchy, survival is the first need of human beings. Only when the needs at this level are satisfied, can we move to the next, the higher level, so as to finally realize the value of our life.

To sum up, the story of Peach Blossom Spring is essentially a novel about seclusion with the mode of "cave" and the content of devilry. Tao Yuanming "not only believed in the philosophy of Taoism, but also believed in the creed of life. They also believed in Taoist immortal learning, which is their life sustenance, so they pursued seclusion and longevity at the same time, and cultivated their way of life, which had become the ideal way of life for scholars for a long time in ancient China." [10] Peach Blossoms Spring is illusory, beautiful and full of hope. It has been deeply integrated into Chinese literature and history, being inherited in the accumulation of classical traditional culture, and provided spiritual home and strength to overcome sufferings for countless struggling literati.

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Remarks: About the author: Qi Juan, female, born in Dazhou city, Sichuan province, master of ancient Chinese literature of Southwest University, as an associate professor in School of literature and communication, Sichuan University of Arts and Sciences, mainly engaged in the study of ancient Chinese literature and Ba-Shu Culture. This paper is a periodical paper of the general topic of the 13th five-year plan of Sichuan provincial social science office, "Studies on recluse literature in Han, Wei and Six dynasties" (No: SC18B108), and a key topic of Sichuan provincial department of education, "Studies on recluse novels in Wei and Jin dynasties" (No: 16SA0110).

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