

(Mis)translating *The Peach Blossom Spring*: Translation as Creative Intervention

The Peach Blossom Spring

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Note: The following piece contains three translations of the same text, each independent from the others. The original is a fable by Tao Yuanming written some 1500 years ago.

FIRST TRANSLATION

In the Eastern Jin dynasty, during the year of Taiyuan, there lived a fisherman from Wuning. Rowing down a green river, the man forgot his way, and found himself amidst peach blossoms. They grew on both banks, stretching for hundreds of steps. All over the bushes were bright fallen petals. Bewildered, he kept rowing, struck by desire to see the woods to their ends.

At the river's mouth sat a mountain where a slit gave flickers of light. Abandoning his boat, the fisherman slipped in. At first, the passage was very narrow, but after several dozen steps everything turned bright. Fields and pools, bamboo and mulberry trees, neat intersecting paths. From all directions came the calling of roosters and dogs.

Men and women of all ages, clothed like foreigners, tilled the land, seeming natural and content. Seeing the fisherman, they became greatly frightened, and asked him from whence he came. Then they prepared him a feast, pouring him wine, slaughtering a rooster. All the villagers, hearing of a stranger's arrival, came to investigate. They recounted: "During the Qin wars our ancestors, with their wives and children, fled to this hidden place never to re-emerge. Since then, we have lived apart from the world." And they asked: "What times do we live in now?" They did not know of the Han, much less the Wei, or Jin! The fisherman answered them, to sighs of regret. In succession the villagers hosted their guest, giving him food and wine. After some days, the man decided to leave. And the villagers: "Do not tell others about this place."

The fisherman retrieved his boat and rowed down the river, marking signs at every turn. He recounted all to the town official, who immediately dispatched men to follow him back to the clearing. But they lost their way, unable to retrace his route.

It is said that Liu Ziqi, a learned Nanyang scholar, planned eagerly to find this place, but passed from illness before he could begin his attempt. Since then, no one has come to seek this land.

SECOND TRANSLATION

Rowing down a green river, the man forgot his way, and suddenly found himself

At the mouth

of a stranger

W h

o

said to him

marking signs at every turn

eagerly

come

FINAL TRANSLATION

We all watched his approach from afar. Wild-eyed, he broached into our territory, raising his arms above his head as though anticipating an onslaught of arrows.

We watched him try once more. With his bevy of men, all fitted in armour, how cocksure he suddenly appeared. And the leaf of their vessel blew further and further away.

Why (mis)translate?

I wrote this poem, which was first published in my pamphlet *Rustlings*, as an exercise in ambiguity. The poem also asks:

1. How might translation be used as a poetic form?
2. How can we creatively re-read (and re-write) classical literature?

The source text is *The Peach Blossom Spring*, a political fable by Chinese writer Tao Yuanming dating from 421 CE. I was struck by its motif of *communicative ambiguity*. The utopia is a secret out of time and place, a secret the fisherman is warned gravely not to reveal, and his treacherous attempts to relay its existence fail—it seems like the village is out of step or even irreconcilable with the world of rational language. Yet it is also through the medium of *text* that Tao's utopia is willed into a longstanding literary-cultural existence. An unspeakable, existenceless place that is paradoxically spoken into being, the peach blossom utopia mirrors the notion of a perfect translation: impossible and ideal, only existing through language but always hampered by it.

In my poem, I apply creative mistranslations to *The Peach Blossom Spring* as a way of exploring the inherent ambiguities in translation and meaning-making. This is a good time to bring up the etymological roots of *translation*: originally, it meant to carry across, as in to carry across *water*. Recall how the fisherman floats down a scenic river into the village by chance then fails to return; likewise, as readers and writers, we can easily 'lose [our] way' on water while trying to locate meaning.

Does it matter when the view is so lovely?

Further readings:

- Tse, Gabrielle. *Rustlings*. Verve Poetry Press, 3 Apr. 2025.
- Weinberger, Eliot. *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei (with More Ways)*. New Directions Publishing, 11 Oct. 2016.
- Ying, Qiu. "The Peach Blossom Spring 桃花源圖." Art Institute of Chicago, 1535, www.artic.edu/artworks/75361/the-peach-blossom-spring-%E6%A1%83%E8%8A%B1%E6%BA%90%E5%9C%96.

Which translation do you prefer and why? Vote in the QR code!

