



A painting of Peach Blossom Spring, on the walkway at the Summer Palace in Beijing.

Peach Blossom Spring 桃花源記

Original by Tao Yuanming 陶淵明, c. 421; this version in modern English by John Millen

The fisherman, Wen, was having a bad day. He had set off from Wuling at daybreak, and now the sun was high in the sky and he had caught only a handful of fish.

As his fishing lines and nets hung limply over the side of his boat, Wen took another swig of wine. Then he cast another line into the water. He felt quite peaceful - just drifting aimlessly in the boat, taking the occasional glug of wine, and thinking about nothing.

One of his fishing lines started to bob up and down furiously, but Wen didn't see. He just dangled his right hand into the cool water and slowly sipped the last drops of wine.

He closed his eyes and didn't notice as the boat was swept upstream - against the current. Then the wine cup fell from his hand into the water.

Suddenly, the air was filled with an intoxicating smell and Wen's eyes blinked open. Hundreds of blossoming peach trees lined the river. Where was he? Pink petals were falling all around him into the water. He had never sailed so far up the river before or seen this vast grove of peach trees. He started to row further upstream to see how far the peach trees stretched.

Wen steered his boat towards the riverbank where the peach trees thinned out and he could see what looked like a cave on the side of a low hill. He clambered ashore and headed towards the cave mouth. Intrigued, the fisherman walked into the darkness.

At first, the passage was so narrow he could hardly pass. He felt his way with his hands, keeping his head low and his step steady. All of a sudden, the passage opened out into daylight, and Wen stopped in disbelief. In front of him stretched a great valley filled with fields, gardens, bamboo and mulberry groves, and clusters of small, white houses. Figures in brightly coloured clothes were working in the fields under a pale blue sky, dappled with thin clouds.

Where was this valley? It was like nothing he'd seen before.

Wen felt there was nothing to be afraid of here, and he scrambled happily down the hillside onto a path that led around some fields. An old man looked up and smiled as Wen passed. In the next field, a young woman was gathering sunflowers. She looked up and greeted Wen. The fisherman stopped, suddenly filled with hundreds of questions he wanted to ask about this place and the people who lived here.

"You are a stranger to our valley," the young woman said. "I will call my grandfather to welcome you. We never see strangers here. He will want to bid you welcome and ask why you are here and how you found us. I am Lin Ni. Please come with me."

In no time at all, Wen was chatting to Lin Ni and her grandfather in the kitchen of their cottage. The old man explained that, centuries before, in the Qin dynasty, a group of villagers had travelled to this isolated place and hidden there to escape the horrors of war. Since that day, they had had no contact with the outside world, and that was how they wanted their lives to remain ... forever.

Wen returned to his boat, after promising the people of the valley that he would tell no one about their existence.

Yet secrets have a habit of leaking out. Rumours began to spread around Wuling about a valley beyond a vast grove of peach trees where people lived forever.

Yet no explorer ever found the place, and the stories died away. However, sometimes in springtime, peach petals can be seen floating down the river past Wuling. Odd! There are no peach trees in the area. Could there be some truth in the ancient rumour after all?