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The Land of Peach Blossoms

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Source: *Manoa*, Vol. 15, No. 2, The Mystified Boat: Postmodern Stories from China (Winter, 2003), pp. 125+127-133

Published by: [University of Hawai'i Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230242>

Accessed: 29-10-2015 06:18 UTC

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## *The Land of Peach Blossoms*

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The Land of Peach Blossoms survives in an ancient legend passed down in the village. People in the village often debate certain details, splitting hairs over this and that version. It could be said that Grandpa Jisi was the only knowledgeable authority on the legend. Grandpa Jisi—ninety years old—had shrunk to just over three feet high, but he still had a snow-white beard more than a foot long. When he would go into the threshing field with his bamboo lounge chair, sit down, and light his long pipe, children would crowd up all around him. The naughty ones among them would pull his beard as he began his broken narrative about life in the Land of Peach Blossoms. To them, it didn't seem the least bit interesting, and was even a little boring. The place sounded like no more than a small village where men farmed, women wove, and everyone got along peacefully. No turmoil. No war. And that was about it. What interested the children was the miraculous swing. According to the legend, the swing was suspended from the top branch of a huge pine tree that grew at the summit of Mount Zhao. It was no longer clear who had climbed up that huge tree to hang the swing, but he must have been a skilled craftsman. The rope for the swing was twisted from the finest hemp. Nowadays, you can no longer see that kind of hemp. Dazzling white, it passed through strong iron rings in the tree and down to a seat made of beautiful wood. When someone was swinging on the mountaintop, it made a whizzing sound, and mountains and earth vibrated. People in the foothills couldn't bear hearing it. Workmen hurled their tools to the ground, fell down, and covered their ears. People indoors rushed to shut the windows. Everyone said the sound was unbearable.

The last ones to use that swing were two mischievous children. Someone saw them swinging in the air for a long time, and then they were gone. And then people discovered that the swing's rope had broken—cut by a sharp knife. Mount Zhao was a huge mountain, straddling several counties. It wasn't at all unusual for people to go missing there, yet one thing told about this event was very strange. People said that the rope hadn't been severed by the two children, but by the "will of heaven." Since it was the will of heaven, they should have been able to find the two boys' bodies in the area. For two days, all the people of the Land of Peach Blossoms

turned out to search, but it was to no avail. And so people who supported this viewpoint went on stubbornly saying, *It's impossible to ignore the miracle: the children soared into the sky. It happened in a split second.* But what kind of miracle was it? Did they grow wings and soar, or were they carried off by some large roc? Because everyone else ridiculed them, these people refused to go on stating their conclusions.

"Go to the mountain and look around carefully, and you'll still be able to find the place where the swing was," Grandpa Jisi said with his eyes half closed.

One lad stood far away from the crowd of children surrounding Grandpa Jisi. Fifteen years old, small, thin, and somber, he lived in a temple next to the village and supported himself by doing odd jobs. Every day at dusk, when Grandpa Jisi sat in the threshing field and told stories of the Land of Peach Blossoms, the boy showed up. When the children exclaimed "Ah! Ah!" over Grandpa Jisi's stories, a disdainful sneer hung from the corners of the boy's mouth and his eyes shone like those of a night owl.

"For food, they eat what they grow—sweet potatoes, corn, soybeans, and even rice. Pigs, goats, chickens, and ducks run everywhere. And there is also a school built on top of a large cliff. Looking down from there, you can see a deep valley."

"A school, too! A school, too!" the children all shouted happily.

"There are all kinds of things to play with in the school. But there isn't a swing. Swinging has been prohibited." As Grandpa Jisi said this, he opened his eyes for a moment and gave the children a sinister look.

"You're lying!" the children shouted. "Liar, liar!" They tried to pull the old man's beard, but Grandpa Jisi dodged them, covering his white beard with his hands. When he lost his balance, the children turned him upside down and pounced on him.

The children then ran wild, covering the old man with dust before gradually dispersing. Grandpa Jisi righted his bamboo lounge chair, spat energetically, and sat down to relight a pipe. When he looked up, he took the measure of the silent lad who remained hunkering across from him. The lad, whose name was Tai, stared at him in return. Their eyes met, and the air between them grew tense.

Grandpa Jisi had been waiting a long time for Tai to walk over and say something to him, to ridicule his stories as the other children did. But each time he told the legend, this waif Tai kept his distance, yet was reluctant to leave. It was as if he was pitting his strength against Grandpa Jisi's to make the old man loathe him. Grandpa Jisi recalled that Tai and his father had wandered destitute into this village four years earlier. There had been a heavy downpour that day, and people were afraid that torrents of water would rush down the mountain at any moment. Drenched, father and son had taken shelter in the temple. Probably the father caught cold, for he died soon. From then on, Tai had lived in the temple. In the daytime, he

hired himself out, taking his meals in the home of his boss for the day, and at night he slept in a small storeroom in the temple.

Grandpa Jisi would sit in the threshing field until late at night before going inside. He would doze off, listening to the mosquitoes buzz. Horses' heads appeared in his mind. Without exception, those heads all looked at him and whinnied alarmingly. Then Grandpa Jisi would wake up with a start, and look all around in confusion. In his field of vision, however, he always saw only the same person—Tai. Today, however, there was a difference. When Grandpa Jisi woke up with a start from his dream, he saw a second dark shadow. Someone was walking over to the place where Tai was hunkering, and the two youths huddled together, talking in whispers. Grandpa Jisi's vision was worse at night, as if a layer of fog covered his eyes. He was reluctant to address the uninvited guest, so he sat and waited. He reckoned that the moment he'd been expecting had come.

Sure enough, after the stranger disappeared, Tai walked over to Grandpa Jisi. "That was Qige. He came to urge me to ask you. Now, let's have the whole story."

Grandpa Jisi opened his mouth, but he couldn't speak. He felt that the secret—hidden deep in his heart for eighty years and long ago crushed—was beginning to wriggle. It was about to be laid bare in front of this child. He sized up Tai's hazy silhouette. He gasped with wholehearted admiration, yet in his shame he also felt anger. Tai had brushed aside his games of deception and rushed straight to the heart of the matter. At the same time, the boy was exceedingly patient. Grandpa Jisi stared silently at him and sank into a reverie. He thought about the many years he had been building up the legend of the Land of Peach Blossoms; now everyone in the village was thoroughly convinced of its truth. They all discussed the conditions in that society and compared them to their own. But what exactly was the "whole story"? Grandpa Jisi thought, *The whole story is an event from the past that I can't bear to recall.* He had heard it neither from his father nor from his grandfather, but had experienced it himself. Because he couldn't bear to remember it, during his extremely long life he really had forgotten it. Now, even if he wanted to remember it, it was no longer possible. And because he wasn't content with forgetting the story, he had spread these details everywhere in order to calm his inner discontent. Recently, he had heard one of his nephews explain to outsiders, "The Land of Peach Blossoms does indeed still exist. Just think about it: this mountain is so large. What couldn't be hidden inside it? If we say that things we can't see don't exist, isn't that presumptuous?" When his nephew said this, Grandpa Jisi had stood beside him and blushed for reasons that were not apparent to anyone.

"I guess you'd have a lot of trouble talking about what really happened. It's really awkward for you. You're probably surprised that I've made up my mind to investigate." The youth's tone was smug.

“What’s surprising about it?” Grandpa Jisi replied. “As the saying goes, ‘the personality never changes after the age of three.’ Since the day you came to this village, I’ve been waiting for you to make up your mind. How time flies! The sound of the storm that day still resounds in my ears. These past two years, I’ve often been unable to distinguish whether I’m asleep or awake. If you had gone on procrastinating, I wouldn’t have been able to wait.”

Someone overhearing them could never have guessed what they were talking about. The old man and the youth had an unspoken understanding. How they reached this understanding is hard to fathom because this was the first time they were conversing. Sitting there, Grandpa Jisi felt that his life was indeed coming to an end. And with the knowledge that a pair of young feet were about to walk in his stead into the past, he sensed that there wasn’t any event that could truly be forgotten. Just yesterday, halfway to the outhouse, he thought he heard that sound from long ago. At first, he thought he was hallucinating. Then he saw Teacher Yuan Pu. That old man of seventy had also stopped. Like him, he turned toward the outhouse and listened intently. Teacher Yuan Pu was another person who loved to talk of the Land of Peach Blossoms. Approaching him, Grandpa Jisi asked him what he’d just heard, but Yuan Pu’s expression abruptly went blank; then he looked annoyed and said that he had only stopped to breathe the fresh air blowing over from the mountain. Grandpa Jisi didn’t know what Yuan Pu thought he needed to cover up.

Grandpa Jisi couldn’t draw any comfort from the villagers’ enthusiasm for his story about the Land of Peach Blossoms. He constantly felt uneasy because of his shameful forgetfulness. This was why he had to tell the children about ancient events. Later, when he took a crap in the outhouse, he could still hear the restive creaking of the pine branches.

That night, when Tai returned to the temple, Qige had been waiting on the steps for a while. He’d already smoked three cigarettes and ground out the butts in the dirt. In his agitation, he had also kicked out a piece of the door frame.

“We’d better not take anything with us. It isn’t a good idea to leave a trail to follow back out again. Just think: if he hesitates the second that he flies out, can he finish what he set out to do? All the people who’ve gone ahead of us have leapt in without thinking, but still they—”

He meant to continue, but Tai went inside and closed the door, leaving him outside. Pressing close to the window, Qige looked in for a long time, but saw no movement at all. All he could do was quietly go home.

Tai lay on his bed made of broken door planks. His whole body seemed to be on fire. The frightening torment had begun. Perhaps he had to take care of something—something that he didn’t have words for and couldn’t think through clearly. He would likely lose his life because of it. Grandpa

Jisi was the link, but because the old man's lips were sealed, Tai hadn't found the foundation from which to take action. His father's face, when he was near death, had indicated unmistakably that he wanted to entrust something to Tai. With his eyes bulging, he had gripped Tai for all he was worth, but he hadn't been able to say anything. He passed out, then revived many times. He shook Tai's shoulders frantically, but he still couldn't say anything. At the very end, he shouted wildly, and then in sorrow and indignation, closed his eyes. The following year, Tai had become familiar with the legend of the Land of Peach Blossoms, and gradually he came to understand why his father had wanted to bring him from their distant home—crossing mountains and fording rivers—to this particular village. His father had probably realized that his days were numbered and had wanted to leave his son in a place where he could find his own way, where the environment would provide him with a rudimentary education. Now Tai felt as if his father's bulging eyes were again fixed on him, compelling him this time to think. But Tai couldn't find the starting point. He beat on the bed several times with his fist. As his father had, he involuntarily let out a long howl. The kerosene lamp on the windowsill flickered a few times, then went out.

Moonlight sprinkled the room. A child-sized shadow moved slowly to the window, as if to peer in.

"Is it Qige? Go home! This is none of your business!" Tai talked like this on purpose in order to build up his courage.

"It's Grandpa Jisi. Open the door and let me in."

The old man had to stand on tiptoe in order to climb onto the door-plank bed. In the dark, Tai had a different sense of him; he seemed like an old monkey. Only the smell of tobacco on his body called attention to his dignity. Extending an icy, withered hand, the old man took Tai's hand and didn't let go. The boy sneezed several times and grew cold all over.

"I still don't understand," Tai said.

"You'll understand soon enough. If you'll help me, I'll be able to remember."

As Grandpa Jisi shifted his body, his old bones made cracking sounds.

"Put my legs out straight on the bed. I can't move."

As Tai bent down and held those tiny legs and placed them on the bed, he again had the impression that the old man was like a monkey.

Grandpa Jisi leaned on Tai's rice-husk pillow and repeatedly gasped for breath as he stretched his legs out straight. Still holding the boy's hand tightly, he haltingly told him that the sound was everywhere. When he was in the threshing field, he would turn his head all around. It made no difference whether he faced the mountain valley, the fishpond, the large buildings of the village, or the paddies. He heard the same sound everywhere. He felt that this very evening he would surely be able to remember the event that he had forgotten. And then he would pass it on to Tai. After

that, both of them would be at peace. But now, he had to ask Tai to massage his legs; otherwise, he wouldn't know he was awake.

Tai massaged Grandpa Jisi's skinny legs, though he felt that he was only massaging bones. The old man began trembling and couldn't help sighing. "Oh, that's a relief. Oh, that feels so good."

"Did you make up the swing? If you were the child who fell, why don't you have any injuries? And you still haven't flown to the sky. You're in the village every day."

"Ah, ah, ah! I'm remembering! I recall—I recall—you won't have any doubt about the Land of Peach Blossoms, will you?"

"How could I? Wasn't that why my father brought me here? I remember the first night after we started out. We were in the wilderness, and three wolves were chasing us. We both thought we would die... Hey, aren't you listening?"

In the moonlight, Tai saw Grandpa Jisi's beard, white as snow. One hand hovered over his beard, and his eyes slowly closed. Solicitously, Tai continued massaging him, rhythmically, over and over. Suddenly, the legs began to stiffen. Gradually, they grew cold. Tai's hands stopped moving, and two tears congealed at the corners of his eyes.

The villagers gossiped about Grandpa Jisi dying in Tai's room. The lad didn't attend the funeral, but went to work in a neighboring village. Everyone resented this. They said that Tai was heartless and a rootless vagrant after all, and that Grandpa Jisi had trusted him for nothing.

From then on, life in the village was extremely lonely for Tai. No one wanted to acknowledge him. When children saw him walking up from a distance, they scattered in all directions. They said that he was stained with the "air of a devil," which would affect anyone who got close to him. Naturally, this was what the adults had told them.

After a while, the villagers chose a new authority on the Land of Peach Blossoms: a seventy-five-year-old woman who, year in and year out, lived with pigs. In the evening, this old woman, Aunt Mao, sat in the threshing field where Grandpa Jisi had formerly sat. Children thronged around to listen to her tell the story. They were unaware of any change in the village.

"That's right. The Land of Peach Blossoms is inside the big mountain. Just look at that mountain. It is really large—so large that no one can say how large." Energetically tapping her pipe, Aunt Mao said, "The most important thing, though, isn't the swing, but the millstone."

"The millstone?!" The children's eyes popped out in surprise.

"Two curious children peeped at that millstone all day long, and later they went missing. With such a big millstone, people supposed that they had been pulverized long ago, mixed with grain, and eaten by everyone."

The children were quiet, and the smoke that Aunt Mao exhaled wafted into a dense, puzzling fog.

From a distance, Tai was sneering. He thought to himself, *Aunt Mao is really very different from Grandpa Jisi. But because of her cunning, the urchins don't dare touch a single one of her fingers or toes.* He was amazed that he had never noticed such a strong woman in the village. Now that Grandpa Jisi had died, he felt that his future was becoming hazier. Sometimes, he didn't sleep all night but would sit on his door-plank bed, deep in thought. He wondered why Grandpa Jisi hadn't disappeared more than eighty years ago instead of staying in the village. And what was the real version of the event? The more he thought about it, the more he felt that a legacy was a scary thing, especially the one he shared with the old man. Now, as he gazed at the seventy-five-year-old Aunt Mao, his heart suddenly raced. *Perhaps—perhaps she was the one who had observed the event?*

Aunt Mao had spotted Tai long before then, and was waiting for him to approach her.

Hesitantly, slowly, Tai came up. It was the first time he'd noticed that the old woman's gray hair was so luxuriant, fringing her face like a halo and making her look a little like a lion.

"Resentment won't help you, son. You need to submit to fate," she said as she puffed on her pipe.

"But you have to give me some of the clues. As it is, I'm being kept in the dark...My father didn't have a prior agreement with all of you, did he?"

"Nonsense!" She tapped her pipe sternly. "Muddled thinking does you no good. Who would have made a prior agreement with a man like your father? To use an image that I'm afraid you won't like, he charged into this village like a homeless dog being chased."

Hearing her talk like this, Tai saw before his eyes his father's flustered and exasperated expression. He couldn't rub the image away.

Lowering his head, the lad headed home, thinking, *Autumn has arrived and the nights are getting chilly, yet Aunt Mao stands watch every night in the threshing field. What's she waiting for?* In the morning, as he went through the field on his way to the neighboring village, he saw the old woman dozing in the bamboo lounge chair. Her pipe had fallen to the ground, and the wind had blown tobacco all over. At times like this, a shiver ran down Tai's spine. He thought that this was the kind of village in which a certain faith could establish itself and last forever. When he reached the corner and was about to enter the temple, he heard Qige behind him, calling his name but not approaching. He knew that Qige was agitated, but he hadn't yet made up his mind. Two days before, they had gone to the mountain and looked around. At that time, harboring evil designs, Qige had pointed at a deep cave and asked Tai to go into it. After thinking about it for a long time, Tai had refused, and Qige had angrily called him a coward. When Tai returned to his room, a thought suddenly



flashed in his mind, *Why not stay here? If I stayed in the village, couldn't I spend every day thinking about the things I am now brooding about? In a village like this, people all talked about the same thing. Could I ever find another place like this?* He opened the window and heard Qige still calling him. The voice rose and fell. Qige was unsurpassed in stubbornness. Tai felt that he finally understood his father's dying words.

That night, the moon was like a large silver platter. Aunt Mao tapped on his window, then many swaying shadows fell across it. Tai rushed out the door and saw in the darkness that all of the villagers had come. They were gathered in little groups outside the temple, all murmuring to each other. When they saw him come out, they all fell silent at once. From inside the storeroom at the side of the temple came Qige's distinct voice.

Tai still hesitated a moment, but in the end he walked up the small path with Qige. Behind them, the villagers began talking again, and their voices rose as though they were going to chase the two boys. Tai looked back once, but saw that they hadn't moved. His legs started trembling and his teeth chattering. Qige walked ahead. After a while, Qige turned around and waited for Tai to catch up, then repeatedly consoled him, saying that the Land of Peach Blossoms surely wasn't a place that drew people to their deaths. Tai would be able to return to the villagers without any trouble.

Tai's situation was the same as Grandpa Jisi's had been. What happened that night was completely erased from his memory. Qige didn't return from the mountain. It was said that he had run away. Years went by, and Tai became an old man. He didn't like to talk. He just went on sitting in the threshing field, where he stared blankly, concealing the treasure of the story of the Land of Peach Blossoms deep in his heart. Children played in the threshing field, but no one approached him. He gave his knee a light slap. In his innermost being, he knew that he had become the authority on the event.

*Translation by Karen Gernant and Chen Zeping*