

## A STUDY OF THE LANDSCAPE AT THE WANG RIVER VILLA THROUGH ANALYSIS OF THE POEM "DEER PARK" BY WANG WEI

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### Introduction

This paper examines the Wang River Villa of the Tang Dynasty. It was owned by the poet Wang Wei and is written about in his "Wang River Collection," an anthology of twenty landscapes that creates an experience in architectural space. Each landscape is the title of a poem and all of these poems are composed of a five-character Chinese quatrain, which is a traditional style of Chinese fixed verse. These are mainly nature poems that concern natural landscapes. What is also a feature of Wang Wei's "Wang River Collection" is that the poetic contents are not fictitious landscapes. They are the real landscapes of a real villa. This fact is especially important for this paper's architectural research.

Previous research on the Wang River Villa has pointed out the desire for a pure land as an escape from everyday life, while noting Wang Wei's use of the Buddhist concept [1]. Wang Wei created original landscapes under the influence of Xie Lingyun, Tao Yuanming, and others. The nature composed by Wang Wei was not a threatening object like ancient China nor was the pastoral of the city suburb composed by him a place of production. It was a Utopia of escape from reality that is embodied in the architecture.

On the other hand, the characteristics of "escaping" and "leaving" are also general features of the villa. For example, in Japanese villas, the concept of leaving reality far behind is referenced. In the case of the Shugakuin Imperial Villa, the classical literature of Kenko Yoshida and other anchorites was referenced by the emperors [2]. In the Kawara Imperial Villa of Empress Meisho, leisure activity was a representation of the fictional classic world [3]. An ideological background for a villa is somewhat common in East Asia.

This author does not know whether this common characteristic of East Asian villas is originally from China or is based on Buddhist thought. However, the similarity between such foreign cultures is as important as the cultural differences. This symposium is an opportunity to discuss the identity of culture. This author expects that this paper is suitable for the theme of this symposium and will inspire positive argument.

In the former study [1], the author classified prior researches on the landscape of the Wang River Villa, although the individual landscape could not be studied. In other words, poetic decipherment and consideration were not undertaken. In this research, the author will closely observe one landscape of the Wang River Villa and examine it in detail with the aim of clarifying the concrete features of the villa landscape.

This study researches the landscape in the field of architecture using the method of poetic decipherment. As mentioned above, it is important that a realistic place is the basis of the poetry. Wang Wei's Wang River Collection is a precious text that describes historical architecture, specifically, the Wang River Villa.

Essentially, reading a poem is an act of creation similar to composing a poem. The Japanese term “yo-mu (よむ)” has two meanings, “reading (読む)” and “composing (詠む).”

Weinberger said [4]:

The point is that translation is more than a leap from dictionary to dictionary; it is a reimagining of the poem. As such, every reading of every poem, regardless of language, is an act of translation: translation into the reader’s intellectual and emotional life. As no individual reader remains the same, each reading becomes a different—not merely another—reading. The same poem cannot be read twice.

When reading a poem, we read it in a new way every time. The reader’s mental condition changes the meaning of the poem. Does the interpretation of poetry in which a meaning wavers in such a manner become the method of research?

Furthermore, what is the “space” of architecture? The “space” mentioned here does not mean a static and measurable space, nor a fixed physical space. It is a “space” of lively experience.

The Japanese poet Tachihara writes [5]:

The experience of space is one time only. The same cannot be experienced again; the same space is not there even when turning back.

The space referred to by Tachihara is the same as Weinberger's poem. The experience of space is an act of creation akin to the poetical experience.

The author describes space concretely through poetic decipherment. Of course, this method does not describe every aspect of the Wang River Villa; the author merely tries to describe a part of the spatial experience and thus it is not a useful study for all researchers. However, if the research is honest, we are able to describe an instance of space, making the conclusion obtained useful for certain research. It is quite significant to this author.

## **Wang Wei, the Wang River Villa and the “Wang River Collection”**

Wang Wei is known as a poet, but he was originally a government official. There are several theories regarding the date of his birth, but the consensus is that he was born around 700 A.D., which is during the same period as Li Po and Du Fu. Du Fu actually wrote about Wang Wei.

The Wang River Villa was owned by Wang Wei. It originally belonged to Sung Chih-Wen. It was located in Lantian County about fifty kilometers southeast of Chang’an.

Information about the villa is limited. Except for some descriptions, the “Wang River Collection” by Wang Wei is the only historical record that provides a means of envisioning it. The collection consists of twenty titles and each title corresponds to viewpoints in the villa. “Deer Park,” one of the titles of the collection, is the subject of this paper.

## **An Interpretation of “Deer Park” and its Landscape**

“Deer Park” is a famous poem, as is “Bamboo-Midst Cottage,” of the “Wang River Collection.” It is a sample of Wang Wei's poetry contained in “Selection of Tang Poems” and is well known in Japan. It composes a scene through natural poetry, a recurrent feature of Wang Wei's poetry.

Weinberger put forth the following figure (Fig. 1) and described the intricacies of Chinese characters [4]. Translations by Paz and Hinton are included for reference.

(text)				
空 山 不 見 人				
但 聞 人 語 響				
返 景 入 深 林				
復 照 青 苔 上				
(character-by-character translation)				
Empty	mountain(s) hill(s)	(negative)	to see	person people
But	to hear	person people	words conversation	sound to echo
To return	bright(ness) shadow(s)	to enter	deep	forest
To return Again	to shine to reflect	green blue black	moss lichen	above on (top of) top

Fig. 1

*In the Deer Park Hermitage* (translation by Paz)

No people are seen on this mountain.

Only voices, far off, are heard.

Light breaks through the branches.

Spread among the grass it shines green.

*Deer Park* (translation by Hinton)

No one seen. Among empty mountains,  
Hints of drifting voice, faint, no more.

Entering these deep woods, last sunlight  
Flares on green moss again, and rises.

A single character may be noun, verb, and adjective. It may even have contradictory readings: character 2 of line 3 is either jing (brightness) or ying (shadow). Again, context is all. Of particular difficulty to the Western translator is the absence of tense in Chinese verbs: in the poem, what is happening has happened and will happen. Similarly, nouns have no number: rose is a rose is all roses.

Contrary to the evidence of most translations, the first person singular rarely appears in Chinese poetry. By eliminating the controlling individual mind of the poet, the experience becomes both universal and immediate to the reader.

The Chinese characters make it difficult to translate Wang Wei's poem into other languages. If a landscape is a view with meaning, the interpretation of the meaning is based on language. Weinberger quotes the opinion of Paz [4]:

The translation of this poem is particularly difficult, for the poem carries to an extreme the characteristics of Chinese poetry: universality, impersonality, absence of time, absence of subject. In Wang Wei's poem, the solitude of the mountain is so great that not even the poet himself is present.

Paz raises "universality, impersonality, absence of time, absence of subject," etc. as poetic features. The meaning of the landscape is experienced through these Chinese features.

In this paper, while seeing the impression received when reading "Deer Park," or its perception in retrospect, poetic scenery is considered while paying attention to "the absence of the poet."

### Poetic decipherment of "Deer Park" in Japan

The Japanese take a special approach to reading Chinese poetry: A Japanese kana suffix is given to the Chinese character, changing it to Japanese. Since this method requires some interpretation, different results may arise, but it becomes fundamentally similar text translated

into Japanese. It is translation peculiar to the kanji cultural sphere into Japanese and is not correct "translation."

Kobayashi describes his impression of "Deer Park:" [6]

Sound that is transmitted through air from a distance. Reflection of the deeply inserted setting sun. This poetry expresses a profound and remote atmosphere in a mountain well.

Watanabe also points out the quiet atmosphere of this poetry [7]:

In two lines of the first half, the quiet world at the time of evening is composed. Sound is made in order to express quietness. It is an effective expression of poetry to use sound...Two lines of the second half have caught momentary beauty...Wang Wei, the father of Southern painting (nanga), sketched the scene before his eyes as it was.

While Watanabe points out a quiet atmosphere, the expressed scene is called sketching. This is a feature characteristic of Wang Wei as a nature poet. However, on one side, Watanabe also points out his poetry is affected by Buddhism [7].

This poetry is unrelated to real deer; rather, Wang Wei is conscious of the "Sarnath." The Sarnath is the first place for Gautama Buddha to culture a person practicing asceticism and is a holy place for Buddhists. We should consider the influence of Buddhism on this poetry.

While interpreting in this fashion, we must be conscious of Iritani's analysis as well. Iritani observes, "Light breaks through the branches" in "Deer Park:" [8]

In the "Wang River Collection," Wang Wei is not composing a realistic landscape of the Wang River Villa...what he tried to compose was surreal, moreover, a sketch of a quiet world of rest. Wang Wei is not a poet who composes fantasy by fantasy. Wang Wei is a poet who makes readers remember fantasy through realistic expression...this is not expressing the landscape of paradise directly, but expressing a realistic scene. However, it recalls the image of paradise in the Pure Land and impresses an atmosphere of the Pure Land on the Wang River Villa.

When these aspects are considered synthetically, the landscape of "Deer Park" is observed as a strictly realistic scene, while reflecting the Buddhistic concept. In other words, the Buddhistic concept is dependent on the Buddhistic concept. The Buddhistic concept is dependent on an actual landscape. First, reality is real and Buddhistic scenery is recalled there. People are not seen in "Deer Park." It is a quiet landscape with no sound by sound.

## Poetic decipherment of "Deer Park" in the West

The Japanese interpretation of "Deer Park" consists of a landscape of quiet with no people. This interpretation is common also in the West. In his book "19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei," Weinberger compares and considers many Western "Deer Park" translations. There are sixteen different translations. When translating to each language, a subtle difference of translation is discerned. The Chinese view of the landscape differs from the Western view.

For example, Fletcher translated "Deer Park" as follows: [4]

So lone seem the hills; there is no one in sight there.  
But whence is the echo of voices I hear?  
The rays of the sunset pierce slanting the forest,  
And in their reflection green mosses appear.

Weinberger comments: [4]

Fletcher, like all early (and many later) translators, feels he must explain and "improve" the original poem. Where Wang's sunlight *enters* the forest, Fletcher's rays *pierce slanting*; where Wang states simply that voices are heard, Fletcher invents a first-person narrator who asks where the sounds are coming from. (And if the hills are *there*, where is the narrator?)

Thus, in Fletcher's version, a *narrator* appears. Such *narrator* does not appear in the poetry of Wang Wei and the subject who hears the echo of voices is not clarified either. It is not known whether the sound is even heard by Wang Wei. Moreover, Weinberger says, "And if the hills are there, where is the narrator?" In Wang Wei's poetry, we do not know where the narrator is and, even more, there is no telling what "the hills" indicate. The landscape, which should be individual, is composed universally. When translating the poetry of Wang Wei into English, Weinberger points out that many methods of using the first person subject are seen in older translations, such as Bynner & Kang-hu (1929), Jenyns (1944), and Chen & Bullock (1960). On the other hand, Weinberger evaluates the absence of "I" in the translation by Liu (1962). Except for a few, "I", the narrator-observer, does not appear in later translations. The first part of the translation by Rexroth (1970) is as follows: [4]

Deep in the mountain wilderness  
Where nobody ever comes  
Only once in a great while  
Something like the sound of a far off voice.

Weinberger critiques this translation: [4]

In line 2, by using *comes* rather than the more obvious *goes* he has created an implicit narrator-observer (i.e., "comes here where I am") without using the first person.

Weinberger appraises Rexroth for not using the first person. However, Weinberger finds that "the philosophical *empty mountain* becomes the empirical *mountain wilderness*" and thus the translation is empirical in expression and indicates that the ideological background of Wang Wei is insufficient.

It is Paz that points out Wang Wei's Buddhist background. Paz evaluates Wang Wei's poetry as follows: [4]

This is nature poetry, but a Buddhist nature poetry: does not the quatrain reflect, even more than the naturalistic aestheticism traditional in this kind of composition, a spiritual experience? ... An allusion to the Amida Buddha: at the end of the afternoon the adept meditates and, like the moss in the forest, receives illumination. Poetry perfectly objective, impersonal, far from the mysticism of St. John of the Cross, but no less authentic or profound than that of the Spanish poet. Transformation of man and nature before the divine light, although in a sense inverse to that of Western tradition. In place of the humanization of the world that surrounds us, the Original spirit is impregnated with the objectivity, passivity and impersonality of the trees, grass and rocks, so that, impersonally, it receives the impartial light of a revelation that is also impersonal. Without losing the reality of the trees, rocks and earth, Wang Wei's mountain and forest are emblems of the void.

According to Paz, Wang Wei's poetry is "perfectly objective, impersonal" and a "Transformation of man and nature before the divine light." The landscape is an object that exists before it is given a meaning by man and is an ordinary phenomenon. The landscape is simply an echo of light and sound. It is, for Wang Wei, one landscape of the Wang River Villa.

### **Conclusion: The Landscape at the Wang River Villa: The Absence of People**

The landscape of Wang Wei is scenery before humanization. The absence of people in the landscape does not simply mean it is uninhabited. The human voice is there; it is only expressed that there is no human figure. Researchers indicate the influence of Buddhism in Wang Wei's poetry; however it is not a religious concept. It is rather the most realistic landscape of the Wang River Villa, which reflects the soul of Wang Wei.

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