A Study of the Classical Landscape at the Wang River Villa of Wang Wei

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Abstract: The landscape of Wang Wei's Wang River Villa is examined by reviewing the essays and papers written about the poetical collaboration, the “Wang River Collection.” The purpose of this paper is to clarify the meaning of villa architecture in China. The author expects that this research will contribute to a mutual understanding between cultures. The villa was a Utopia for Wang. On the other hand, he was a pious Buddhist and Buddhistic concepts are reflected in the landscape. I consider the features of the classical landscape of Xie Lingyun and "Chu Ci," as written in "The Collection," a reflection of the Buddhistic concept. When considering what the classics meant to Wang Wei, it is apparent that his villa is a representation of the classical landscape. It is not an imitation of the classical landscape, but a unique and original creation of art by Wang.

1. Introduction

The Wang River Villa (_wheel) was purchased by the Chinese poet Wang Wei (_wheel) and was written about in his anthology, the “Wang River Collection” (“Wangch'un ji”  bánh). Wang Wei was a government official who lived during the Tang Dynasty of China approximately 1300 years ago. Like Li Po (_wheel) and Du Fu (wheel), he is one of the most famous poets of Chinese literature. His poetry has been translated in nearly every language and he is well known in the West.

This paper is a study of architecture. The purpose of this paper is to clarify an issue in the architecture of the villa. This paper regards the Wang River Villa as architecture or landscape and discusses Wang Wei's “Wang River Collection” as a description of his experience there. It is a historical fact that he lived in the Wang River Villa and wrote the “Wang River Collection.” It is logical to view his poetry as a description of the scenic in this research, as Tatsuya Konno (2003) has stated in his research. A method of architectural research is to consider the distinctive features of architectural places through poetry. This is a concrete method for clarifying the essential concern of the experience in architecture. This paper considers architecture a human issue and mainly refers to past research.

On the other hand, the theme of this paper is also cultural research. The characteristics of a certain culture differ from the characteristics of another. These differences are what distinguish a certain culture. The difference between cultures results from differences in climate and geography. Cultural history is a history of tradition and customs. However, the basis of these differences requires similarity. To identify with something is to accept differences and similarities simultaneously. We are able to understand other cultures. At the very least, we should believe that we have the ability to accept other cultures. There may be universality at the base of all cultures. Moreover, it may be the fact that we are all human. This paper attempts to clarify one feature of culture through historical Chinese architecture. The author expects that this research will reveal an issue of the universal human being.

2. The “Wang River Collection” by Wang Wei

As mentioned in the introduction, this paper is a study of the Wang River Villa. The villa was written about in Wang Wei’s anthology, the “Wang River Collection.” In other words, the villa is composed by the “Wang River Collection,” which includes twenty pieces. For each poem written by Wang, his friend Pei Di ( Dao) wrote twenty replying couplets. Therefore, this anthology consists of a total of forty poems. According to Taichiro Kobayashi (1944), this anthology was completed around 756 A.D. Hideki Watanabe (2010) indicates that it was completed around 743 A.D. The time of completion is therefore not certain. In any case, the completion was determined to be before the “rebellion of An Lu-shan (安防山的反乱),” which took place when Wang’s life was the most stable.

Each poem is composed of a five-character Chinese quatrains (五言絕句), which is a traditional Chinese style of fixed verse. Although written in the preface by Wang himself, these twenty titles correspond to viewpoints in the villa. The titles "Apricot-Grain Cottage" (_,", "Bamboo-Midst Cottage" (_,", "South Lodge" (_,", "North Lodge" (_, etc., are architectural sites, and "Master-Flourish Ridge" (_,"Bamboo-Clarity Mountains" (_," etc., are the names of hills or mountains. "Deer Park" (_," etc., are fence-enclosed parks. Moreover, a pathway, spring, and lake at the villa are also named and composed in the poetry.

Taichiro Kobayashi (1944) critiques the “Wang River Collection” as follows:

When I read the “Wang River Collection,” I noticed first that Wang Wei tended to move away from the contamination of the human world. The “Wang River Collection” has a clean image. Yearning for such Pure Land
can be found throughout the entire piece. This yearning is expressed as an emotion of silentness of Wang Wei’s heart. This silence and expression of the quiet view, the words of Zhang Yanyuan (張彥遠), indicates the second most remarkable feature of this poetry. This was Wang Wei’s most important feature for the people of the Tang Dynasty. Moreover, his expression of silence made the villa at Wang River a place of deep mountains distant from the capital. Furthermore, he yearned for a rich Utopia. In any case, separating and escaping from the dirty world is the origin of his art. There is no other work clearer than his poetry in the expression of silentness. (pp. 247-248)

Kobayashi uses a keyword—silentness. Wang Wei escaped from the dirty world and asked for purification. He desired the Pure Land. Kobayashi indicates that such desire is apparent in Wang Wei’s “Wang River Collection.” Sensuке Iritani (1976) holds a similar opinion:

“When reading the “Wang River Collection,” there is no pastoralism in the poetry. Pastoralism regards nature as production or a place of labor. In the “Wang River Collection,” there are words of labor, such as the woodcutter in Wang Wei’s “Bamboo-Clarity Mountains,” rinsing silk in Wang Wei’s “White Rock Shallows” (白石澗), and collecting firewood in Pei Di’s “North Lodge.” However, these are imaginary, it is an ideological expression, and there is no realistic character. Realistic expression is not carried out, either. Furthermore, agriculture and farmers do not appear at all in the poetry, which usually express pastoralism. The poetic view is not pastoral, landscape, or rural landscape, either; for Wang Wei, the Wang River Villa is an object of imagination of art. Then, what kind of imagination did Wang Wei give to the Wang River Villa? I think the purpose of the “Wang River Collection” is to fashion the Wang River Villa as a visionary world isolated from reality. (pp. 614-615)

Iritani critiques Wang’s poetry with a different approach from Kobayashi. While Kobayashi analyzes the overall impression of the poetry, Iritani points out the lack of pastoralism. However, they reach a common conclusion, that is, a lack of actuality in the “Wang River Collection.” Actual refusal becomes the imagination of art and this becomes the composition of the visionary world. Iritani determines also that the world of the “Wang River Collection” is an isolation from reality.

Tatsuya Konno (2004) also considered the absence of pastoralism in the “Wang River Collection.” He determined that the absence of pastoralism in the poetry has the effect of separating the Wang River Villa from the everyday world.

The pastoral landscape differs from the city (Chang’an (長安)) for Wang Wei) landscape. However, since the pastoral exists at places other than the Wang River, the depiction of the pastoral in poetry is to express a separation from the city, but it is not an expression meant to make Wang River the only place. It is not different from other pastoral lands. In order to make the Wang River the only place, the classics need to be quoted to build a world of fantasy. Therefore, there is no pastoralism in the “Wang River Collection.” (p. 125)

Konno indicates that, in the poetry of Wang Wei, classical quotation was an important expression.

In this paper, when examining the Wang River Villa, two key points, “landscape based on the classics” and “isolation from the everyday world,” are especially important, and these points are probably closely related.

3. The Wang River Villa

This chapter examines the Wang River Villa structure. The Wang River is located in Lantian County about fifty kilometers southeast of Xi’an (Chang’an) (Watanabe (2010) p. 114<sup>»</sup>), which is about one day’s distance from the capital. Since it was not far from the capital, the neighborhood consisted of the villas of many influential people. Wang Wei lived in Chang’an often and it is thought that he returned to the Wang River Villa for the holidays (Kobayashi (1944) p. 204<sup>»</sup>). Wang Wei’s mother lived at the Wang River Villa until she died in 750 A.D.

The time when Wang Wei obtained the Wang River Villa varies. According to Watanabe’s research (2010) (pp. 132-133<sup>»</sup>), the earliest time was 726 A.D. based on Kobayashi’s study (1944) <sup>p. 204</sup>. On the other hand, general opinion places the time as around 740 A.D., as noted by Iritani (1976) <sup>p. 582</sup>, Tadahisa Ishikawa (2007) <sup>p. 312</sup>, and others. Watanabe believes that Wang Wei took possession of the villa twice, in 726 A.D. and 741 A.D. Since Wang Wei did not live in the suburbs of Chang’an from 736 A.D. to 739 A.D., the problem lies with before or after that time. In any case, it is known that the villa was owned sometime around 740 A.D. Since the “Wang River Collection,” discussed in this paper, was produced after that time, this experience of Wang Wei took place in the latter half of his life.

The Wang River Villa was originally possessed by Sung Chih-Wen (宋之問, 656?-712?) <Kobayashi (1944) p. 204<sup>»</sup>. He was also a famous poet of the Tang Dynasty. However, he was banished late in life and ultimately committed suicide as a result of further punishment he received. Wang Wei remembers Sung Chih-Wen in the “Wang River Collection.” That fact that Sung Chih-Wen owned the villa was important to Wang Wei. Moreover, the ruined castle of the Jin Dynasty is located on the Wang River, also providing an historical context for the poet.

Iritani quoted the poetry of Sung Chih-Wen at the Wang River and considered the characteristics of the place—Iritani (1976) p. 581<sup>»</sup>:

(About “Lantian Villa” (蘭田山莊), which is poetry by Sung Chih-Wen) It is a work that feels like the pastoral poetry of Sung Chih-Wen. It is like Tao Yuanming (陶淵明), which is a new work of Sung Chih-Wen. …Although it is difficult to guess from one poem that the Wang River may have been pastoral land. (As Kobayashi (1944) reasoned) It is not certain that this was a profitable estate, but there was a plantation on the Wang River and at least it was a place to see a tenant and serf working. The aristocratic villa of the Six Dynasties period (六朝時期) originally was a place to rest and play, with the character of the farm as an income source.

The preceding chapter referred to in this paper indicated that the “Wang River Collection” is not pastoral; however, the pastoral character of the original Wang River Villa was considered to be strong. Besides the “Wang River Collection,” Wang Wei composed other poetry about the Wang River. Konno (2004) pointed out these features:

(a) (Except for the “Wang River Collection”) In Wang Wei’s pastoral poetry of the Wang River, words and
people that represent a secluded life are confirmed.

(b) (Except for the “Wang River Collection,”) the pastoral landscape at Wang River depicts a scene of secluded life.

(c) In poetry, the free life at the Wang River and the everyday life in Chang’an are in contrast. The pastoral landscape of the Wang River is distinct from Chang’an, which is a place of work, and thus makes the Wang River a special place. It is a place where Wang Wei could relax mentally.

(d) Considering the expression of rural landscapes in other poetry by Wang Wei, the place of composition of which is not certain, there is a high possibility that the poem was composed on the Wang River.

Besides the “Wang River Collection,” pastoralism is observed in poetry composed at the Wang River Villa. Konno analyzes pastoralism in contrast to the city. For Wang Wei, the city was Chang’an, which was a place of everyday life and hard work. On the other hand, the Wang River Villa is a place that comforted Wang Wei and allowed him to relax. The Wang River Villa is a villa in that sense and is a special place distant from everyday life. It represents the key point mentioned in the preceding chapter. It was said previously that the Wang River Villa written about in the “Wang River Collection” had twenty views (titles). Wang Wei named those twenty views. Landscape and constructed architecture are included in the twenty views.

Konno examined in detail these twenty views and uncovered a tendency. He examined the total landscape of the Wang River Villa written of in the “Wang River Collection” on the basis of this tendency.

If the “Wang River Collection” is examined, I think Wang Wei is looking at two landscapes at the actual Wang River Villa:

(a) The landscape of the Chang River valley, which is mainly concerned with the poetry of Xie Lingyun (谢灵运); and

(b) The landscape of “Chu (楚),” which is mainly from “Chu Ci” (楚辞).

The poetry of Xie Lingyun and “Chu Ci” are recorded in the “Wen Xuan.” Therefore, Wang Wei recognized not the actual landscape of the place, but the landscape of the Chang River composed in the classic poetry work “Wen Xuan.” I think Wang Wei’s “Wang River Collection” tends to express this world with poetry.

Konno pointed out the influence of classics on the landscape as a tendency of the “Wang River Collection.” The classic is “Wen Xuan” (文选), which is a collection of poetic works edited by Xiao Tong (萧统) during the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties.

Konno explored the reason:

(When Wang Wei composed the landscapes of the “Wen Xuan” into the “Wang River Collection”) The reason is that he looked for classicalness in his own scenery. First of all, realistic features of scenery are acquired from actual experience. However, these feelings are forgotten with the passage of time. The scenery expressed by the classics is inherited with its history. There is the sense of stability of the work. That is, I think that Wang Wei intended to make his scenery a stable thing that does not change and disappear. That is the reason for the many classical landscapes of authoritative literary work. "Wen Xuan" is seen.

"The scenery based on the classics" is an important key phrase for an understanding of the Wang River Villa. It is relevant that Konno demonstrated clearly that the landscape of Wang Wei was based on the classics. However, an understanding of the “Wang River Collection” instead of the theme of an understanding of the Wang River Villa was Konno’s intent. A poetic understanding is the theme. Since this paper undertakes architectural research, an understanding of the Wang River Villa is the theme. Architecture needs to be considered through poetic experience. Based on Konno’s research, a different approach is needed in this paper.

4. Ideological Backgrounds and the Classical Landscape

Wang Wei is known as a pious Buddhist. There are many papers that consider the influence of Buddhism on his poetry. The fact that Wang Wei was called the “poet-Buddha” (诗人佛), as Li Po was called the “poet-transcendent” (诗人仙) and Du Fu the “poet-sage” (诗人圣), is not unrelated to his faith.

Three religions, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, have had historical influence on the Chinese people. Iritani (1976) stated that the Tang Dynasty was a time of comparatively little influence from Confucianism. Li Po was a famous poet who was influenced by Taoism and Wang Wei was influenced by Buddhism.

We must be cautious about the relation between Taoism and Wang Wei. All of his Taoist poetry is social poetry exchanged with a Taoist. Wang Wei lived during the era of Emperor Xuanzong (玄宗). The Emperor Xuanzong expressed Taoist philosophy even in the name of the mausoleum. It was a time when Taoism flourished. It is thought that Taoism flowed in and out of many residences besides the court. It was not odd to have the poetry of a Taoist friend for the sociable Wang Wei. The negotiation between Wang Wei and a Taoist does not have any meaning other than social contact. (p. 473)

Iritani concludes that Taoism did not influence Wang Wei significantly. He examined the Buddhist poetry of Wang Wei in detail, and considered its influence specifically.

Buddhism promised the world of the metaphysical Nirvana beyond reality for Wang Wei. Rather, Buddhism taught Wang Wei that reality is a false image. In China, such thought is only seen in Buddhism. Such thought caused Wang Wei, who could not resign his unpleasant court service. He was able to accept his unpleasant reality with this thought. It is because the world of an idea can be built outside of reality and that reality, which is not escaped, can be escaped. The made-up reality and the world of a true idea are fundamental thoughts to Wang Wei. They are the thought of his art as well. (pp. 491-492)

According to Iritani, the Buddhist concept enables Wang Wei to escape from the reality. It is a secession from everyday life. The purpose of the Wang River Villa was also a secession from everyday life.

Iritani further observed the outlook on nature of the Buddhist concept:

Although Buddhism alone did not teach the Chinese people natural beauty, Buddhism had a big influence on the natural ways of appreciation. Xie Lingyun was not only the first of the Chinese to pursue natural beauty, but he was also the
first Buddhist poet in China. The Buddhistic prosperity and the prosperity of Shanshui poetry (7th-8th) in aristocratic culture are parallel in the Six Dynasties period. (p. 520)

Iritani points out that the hermit who lives in the mountain, who appears in the classical document "Analects" and "Chuang-tzu," is a political refugee. He states that the ancient Chinese hermit did not consciously wish to live in a mountain eternally, but hid himself temporarily. He concludes that, in ancient China, the hermit who enjoyed a life in nature did not exist. However, during the period of the Six Dynasties, where the mountain and the hermit are connected positively, Iritani believes that it became an esthetic object.

Xie Lingyun, who is a nature poet, was an adventurer akin to an alpinist, a large landowner, and also a Buddhist. While he was a large landowner who exerted himself for land reclamation of a lake and development of new rice fields, and was a nature poet, he was also a natural pioneer. However, Buddhism provided the important role of pioneer for him. That is, while reclaiming deep mountains, this was a role that changed the Chinese people's outlook on nature. Buddhists, such as Xie Lingyun, converted the mountain into a spiritual place that was quiet and settled down from the fearful outside world. The Taoist followed in the footsteps of the Buddhist and poets also followed, and the aesthetic sense of respecting nature as beautiful, which was peculiar to China, was created. Wang Wei enhanced such an aesthetic sense to the limit with his art. (pp. 524-525)

Iritani's consideration relates also to the influence of Xie Lingyun and “Chu Ci” in the "Wang River Collection," as Konno pointed out in the preceding chapter. Konno indicated that Wang Wei used classical documents in order to give authority to the "Wang River Collection." However, Iritani asserts that Wang Wei inherited and developed the outlook on nature presented by the classical document. This also differs from the realistic pastoral landscape of Tao Yuanming. This is because there was no depiction of labor in Wang Wei's "Wang River Villa." The nature composed by the poetry of Wang Wei is objective and with reality, but essentially it is a kind of ideological poetry. Was the poet satisfied composing only nature? Didn't he have the desire to convert nature itself with his idea or create nature with his poetry? The desire is inevitable. If there is ability, people will try to achieve it. Wang Wei tried to create nature. Wang Wei investigated the essence as a poet. We should consider the relation between created nature, the Wang River Villa, and his poetry. (p. 578)

Iritani states that the Wang River Villa is nature created by Wang Wei. Wang Wei created his own nature as a poet. It is creation as an artist and is essence.

Hong Zhang (2009) considered the “nature” that Wang Wei created in connection with the Buddhistic concept:

The theme of all works included in the “Wang River Collection” is “nothingness.” To be more precise, Wang Wei expresses the space of “no onlooker.” “No one seen. In flower blooms and falls.” These examples of “nothingness” do not mean “there is anything.” Moreover, they do not signify the silence of ceased sound. For Wang Wei, the “nothingness” life is filled in nature, even if there is no onlooker. … In the space of “nothingness” in the work of Wang Wei, there is no sign of people and neither the author nor an observer. It is a primitive landscape intersecting purely with nature. …Zhuangzi’s thoughts on life, “eternal illuminated in silence” and “illuminating though constantly still” in Buddhism all lurk in this deep silence.

According to Zhang, although people are rarely described in the “Wang River Collection,” “there is nothing” is not Wang Wei’s true intention. Rather, not depicting people there expresses the natural and primitive landscape. The nature of the Wang River Villa is filled with vitality.

What is the meaning of the classics for landscapes? It may be the authorization of scenery, as Konno points out. However, on one side, the classical landscape is the ancients’ first scenery to be suggested by people and is original and unique. It is the experience of the ancients who support our uncertain and unstable experience, and is the path along which our predecessors walked. In other words, it is the basis of the identity that we make a foundation. The classic experience can also become authority in that sense. However, when considering the landscape of Wang Wei as a matter of art, was the classic meaning authorization of the landscape? Rather, is it a representation of the experience of the animated beginning discovered by our predecessors? It is representation and it is creation of art. The landscape of Wang Wei’s Wang River Villa was a new experience enabled by the Buddhist concept enabled in a place called a mountain.

5. Conclusion: Living Far From the Everyday World

The Wang River Villa was one method of escaping from everyday life for Wang Wei. It was a representation of the ideological Utopia for him. This image was described through the “Wang River Collection” with the Buddhistic concept as the basis. His scenery quoted the classical landscape, such as Xie Lingyun and “Chu Ci.” However, it is not an imitation of the classical landscape. His image of the classic was a lively representation of unique scenery. The scenery of the Wang River Villa is a creation of Wang Wei’s art in that sense.

When everyday life is left behind at the Wang River Villa, his Utopia appears. However, when we consider the meaning of Utopia at the Wang River Villa from one aspect, Wang Wei's everyday world should appear. That is, an everyday image and the image of Utopia are different manifestations of the same matter. It is both sides of one sheet of paper. One does not precede the other side; the two are simultaneous. The research method of this paper was to examine the essays and papers written about the poetical works of Wang Wei's “Wang River Collection.” Poetic analysis is omitted. With poetic analysis, we should consider the specific image, which this author will study next.

Endnotes

The heading for endnotes is the style of a first order heading but should not be numbered. The endnotes should be 8 pt, 10 pt leading, numbered. Please conform to the following style:

1. There are various opinions on the birth year of Wang Wei. According to Iritani (1972) and Kobayashi (1964), it is 699 A.D. and, according to Yoshikawa (1952), it is 701 A.D. The historical records describing Wang Wei are detailed in Iritani (1972).
fragrant reeds braided into thatched eaves:
White-Rock Shallows open and clear,
Tall bamboo blaze in meandering emptiness:
Bamboo-Midst Cottage” 「竹里館」
Sitting alone in recluse bamboo dark
I play a ch’in, settle into breath chants.
In these forest depths, no one knows
this moon come bathing me in light.

Roofbeams cut from deep-grained apricot,
kingfisher-green rippling stream water blue.

No one seen. In empty mountains,
And autumn colors mountain distances again:
Such darkness, woodcutters too beyond knowing.

On Autumn-Pitch Mountain roads, they flaunt
Autumn mountains gathering last light,
one bird follows another in flight away.
Shifting kingfisher-greens flash radiant scatters.

Shadows of the Deer Enclosure, “Deer Park”
hermitage, “The Deer Park,” “La Forêt,” “Deer Forest Hermitage,”
Deep in the Mountain Wilderness,” “Deer Fence,” “Deer Enclosure,” “Deer Park,”
“La Forêt,” “Deer Forest Hermitage,”
“Deer Fence,” “Deer Enclosure,” “Deer Park,”
and “Clos aux cerfs.”

Sitting alone in recluse bamboo dark
I play a ch’in, settle into breath chants.
In these forest depths, no one knows
this moon come bathing me in light.

“Bamboo-Midst Cottage” 「竹里館」
Sitting alone in recluse bamboo dark
I play a ch’in, settle into breath chants.
In these forest depths, no one knows
this moon come bathing me in light.