

ON THE EXPERIENCE OF HISTORY AT THE WANG RIVER VILLA OF WANG WEI

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Introduction

This paper attempts to clarify an aspect of the experience of the villa by offering an interpretation of the *Wang River Collection* (『鞞川集』) of poetry by Wang Wei (王維), a Chinese poet of the Tang Dynasty, in considering the meaning of the history of place. In this study, the author takes the poem as a certain representation of experience, and employs the method of analyzing the poetic representation in language. Since poetry is an art, the process of deciphering the poem is also an experience, which cannot be separated out from the historical frame in which we are living today or from the cultural frame of the reading, which here is done by a Japanese interpreter. Therefore, this paper does not purport to offer the “true meaning” of this history, nor does it have any purpose for doing so. Thus the purpose of this paper is to clarify what one feels or how one experiences a place.

In the *Wang River Collection*, Wang Wei composed twenty scenes, which are the titles of its twenty poems, meaning twenty different landscapes are described by the poems. Some titles refer to classic literature, such as the *Wen Xuan* (『文選』) or *Chu Ci* (『楚辭』), before the Tang Dynasty, in which each poem is a short verse written in the style of five-character quatrains. By referencing classical literature, they carry particularly profound meaning. The poetry is arranged in twenty poems starting with “Mengcheng Hollow (孟城坳)” and ending with “Pepper Garden (椒園).” At the beginning, the history of the Wang River Villa is explained, and its natural landscape is described. The subject of the poem is not indicated; the viewpoint is impersonal. In other words, there is an absence of human. Whereas in the middle, guests visit obliquely, and humans appear in the poem. The guests actually visit and then leave; so in the latter half, humans are absent again. As indicated in the title, this paper especially aims to clarify “the experience of history at the Wang River Villa.” As the most important poems for our purposes are the first two of the twenty, the opening poems “Mengcheng Hollow” and “Huazi Hill (華子岡)” will be considered in this paper.

On “Mengcheng Hollow”

“Mengcheng Hollow” is the first poem of the *Wang River Collection* by Wang Wei. The hollow is located at the mouth of the villa, in the northern part of the Wang River villa [1].

孟城坳	Mengcheng Hollow
新家孟城口	Built a new house at the mouth of Mengcheng
古木餘衰柳	Old trees, an elder willow remain

來者復爲誰	Who will be the next owner?
空悲昔人有	Feel empty and sorrow for the past owner

In this poem, the first two lines describe the place, and the last two detail the emotions inspired by it, feeling emptiness and sorrow for a past owner. In the first line, we discover that Wang Wei built a new house. It is said that there was an ancient castle nearby [2]. The “old trees” of the second line are a vestige; “elder willow” too recalls the past. A newly built house and old trees contrast “new” with “old.” The ancient castle inferred is the house of the former owner, Song Zhiwen (宋之問). However, there is a theory that it was from the Eastern Jin period (東晉) [3]. The history might be one that includes a number of past owners. Yet, in the third line, the poem speculates about a future owner, asking “who will be the next owner”? Since Chinese poetry lacks a subject as well as tense, the subject “thinking” may not be Wang Wei. In the same way, the subject of the fourth line, who is “feeling empty and sorrow for the past owner,” is unknown. If Wang Wei is the subject, he is the one who is grieving; but if the subject is the future owner, then it changes. Here, Wang Wei is the object of the grief. He is both a subject and an object in the last line.

History in this poem is experienced both by oneself and, at the same time, by others. The experience is ambiguous. By the absence of subject and tense, the poem holds a certain universality. Individual experience is also an experience of others. Someone else’s experience invokes one’s own experience. Since there have been many owners here, the history is multi-layered, just like one’s experience. Wang Wei experiences grief both by himself and in being grieved by others at this place. Therefore, the emotions of history at the “Mengcheng Hollow” are ambiguous and multi-layered, arousing “emptiness” and “sorrow.” Zhang said, “Emptiness and sorrow are universal feelings which a human feels, when one is touched by an ‘eternity’ of time and space.” [4] In this case, such a viewpoint becomes very important.

On “Huazi Hill”

Next, we consider Wang Wei’s second poem, “Huazi Hill.” The hill is said to be a small mountain near Mengcheng Hollow, and the origin of the name is said to come from a poem by Xie Lingyun (謝靈運).

華子岡	Huazi Hill
飛鳥去不窮	Flying bird endlessly fly away
連山復秋色	Ranging mountains are in autumn colors again.
上下華子岡	Going up and down the Huazi Hill,
惆悵情何極	Sorrowful feelings overflow

In this poem, the first two lines describe the landscape, and the last two are linked with feelings of sorrow experienced while climbing there. “Flying birds” appear in the first line and a state of flying away is described. Birds flying incessantly convey a feeling of endlessness. In the second line, one is glancing over autumn-colored mountains. This also expresses a boundless landscape. Next, the third line, “going up and down the Huazi Hill,” links with the sorrowful feeling in the fourth. Nevertheless, for us readers, it is unexplained why “going up and down the Huazi Hill” elicits sorrow. We do not know whether the hill is sorrowful, or climbing is sorrowful, or the landscape is sorrowful. Here the meaning of “Huazi Hill” must be determined.

Wang Wei borrowed the title from Xie Lingyun [5], so we should look at the original “Huazi Hill,” which is collected in “*Wen Xuan (volume 26)*.” The latter half of the poem reads, “a hermit is no longer there, the hill is just empty. The book that tells about the hermit is worn out; even a stone monument does not exist. You never know what it will be like a hundred generations later. How could you to know about a thousand years ago? I decided to be alone, listen to the sound of the water under the moonlight. And enjoy the scenery that rests just in front of me, I am not here for the past.”

In Xie Lingyun’s “Huazi Hill”, the old hermit is absent and the traces of his history are lost; it is completely empty. A people’s history is apprehended sentimentally, just in trying to embrace the vision of nature before one’s eyes. This is some kind of momentary attitude to enjoy the setting with admiration. In the case of Xie Lingyun, the place is neither idealistic nor transcendent, but rather ontological. So the “Huazi Hill” that Wang Wei cites is also probably not meant as a utopia. Rather, what Wang Wei references is a place with the trace and idea of the human, which has vanished through the years, just the sort of place where an eternal natural landscape expands. In particular, the meaning of “again” in the second line marks a seasonal landscape, which repeats itself even after human influence and then disappears. Nature supersedes human works and continues cyclically. This may also be considered history.

Conclusion

In the poetry of Wang Wei, the feelings of the history are described in terms of “emptiness” or “sorrow.” They emerge in the universal experience in which one becomes the other and the other becomes one. And this feeling is inspired by the overwhelming power of nature, where human work is rendered meaningless in the transcendent experience. In this way, the experience of one’s individuality is almost relativized by eternal time. In the face of the onward marching historical time, there is a moment when one loses his identity. This triggers some kind of “oceanic feeling,” a “sorrow” or “emptiness.” In other words, history for the individual is universal and transcendent.

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