

The Livable Place and the Landscape: The Imagination and the Sense of Place in Traditional Korea

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journal or publication title	歴史における理想郷 東と西
volume	10
page range	95-119
year	1997-03-31
その他のタイトル	生きられる場所と風景 韓国の伝統における理想郷の想像力
URL	http://doi.org/10.15055/00003160

The Livable Place and the Landscape: The Imagination and the Sense of Place in Traditional Korea

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Benedict Anderson has shown that a nation state comes into being only with the constitution of an imaginary equivalent to it. One wonders if it is not the case with any social or political reality constituted as a unity, whether it is a primitive society or any other variety of human collectivities; and in this imaginary equivalent of social reality, there is bound to be a utopian element as part of the regulative principles of the constitution: an idea or a set of ideas, clearly articulated or unconsciously assumed, of what that society is and ought to aspire to be, in its ideal projection. Korea was an ideological state from the late fourteenth century on until the early twentieth century, deliberately constructed to realize a program of Confucian ideals through political organizations. It was difficult for Koreans during this period to conceive of their society apart from this program; there were constant reference, invocation and reminder of this program and its ideals, with the putatively ideal reign of Yao and Shun as the visionary and utopian core in these acts of retrospective return. But besides the Confucian, there were other visions and utopian thoughts, possibly because one utopian thought stimulates another and releases human aspirations in general for a better way of life than as it is given. In any case, it is perhaps not a naive generalization to say that Korea, perhaps more than any other society, seems to have been uniquely haunted by millennial imaginations of ideal places for past several hundred years. They include utopian thoughts, of course, of Confucian inspiration, one version of which became the founding ideology of the last dynasty; ideas, on a more modest scale, and yet nevertheless ubiquitous and persistent, about good places to live, intuitively sensed and yet often ordered, under the general rubric of geomancy, into structured sets of ideas in a mythic language for use in various divinatory and practical projects; and the myths of Taoist immortals and ideal places, preeminently influencing aesthetic expressions in painting and poetry.

Of the sense of ideal places found in political thinking, everyday

topographical sense, art and literature, which often run together to precipitate in a single sense of place, utopian thought and aesthetic expression in the form of landscape, however, may be said to stand to each other in a sharper contrast. For the former concerns ideas of a good society, rationally thought out and systematized to meet various organizational needs of social and political life, while the latter has more to do with the intuitive sense people have of the forms of nature. The contrast is not trivial, for there could be conflict, in issues involving practical ecological decisions, between the two ways of conceiving ideal places, one based on large scale rational thinking, and the other on the intuition of immediate sensuous experience. However, landscape, as it blends inevitably eudaimonic fantasies and geographical reality, seems to serve as a regulative idea for our thinking about places, since landscape, aesthetically appreciated in real life or in its artistic rendition, provides original impulses for utopian restructuring of the earthly environment, and the criterion for testing out the resulting product.

The contrast between utopia and landscape is a matter of degree, however. As the scale of utopian planning diminishes and its application has to come to terms with the reality of terrain, the utopia must merge with landscape. The site and the surroundings of a house one likes to build for personal use, cannot be planned and reconstructed easily, but they must be found, like an *objet trouvé* is found, implicating the sensuous perception of land above abstract conception. This is the case even in civic plans. In pre-modern Korea, there must have been contrasting pulls from the two different modes of conceiving ideal places, but not in such a sharp distinction from each other, partly because of the inevitable, small scale of social engineering in an autarkic agrarian economy that Korea was, and partly because of the governing epistemic regime that put more emphasis on the concrete given of sensory reality and was likely, when it came to a more systematic generalization, to favor an analogical, as it were, against a digital, way of thinking, resulting in what Levi-Strauss may call an instance of the science of the concrete.¹

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Such an archaic science of the concrete was in pre-modern Korea *Pungsu (fengshui)*, usually translated as geomancy, which exerted pervasive influence in the terrene planning of sites for cities, palaces, houses and graves. Whatever its status as a body of knowledge may be, it attempted to combine the sensuous and the rational in terrene thinking by elaborating the sensuous experience of land, accumulated in the anonymous tradition of observations, into a conceptual system, unscientific as it may look to the modern man. Geomantic considerations were fundamental when a group of Confucian idealists, in 1392, in league with a military general, set out to

establish an ideal Confucian state, replacing the Buddhist dynasty of Koryo, and planned a new capital, its site, palaces and streets, which became the matrix of the present city of Seoul where the original ground plan, geomantically guided, can still be read off. They were an important factor in siting places of personal or familial habitation as well, though in the popular practice it was more important in siting graves in places of magical power. Geomancy also served as an important guide in search for good places to live, which formed an alternative strain in Korean utopian thinking. (The strength of this alternative strain may be an indication of the extent of failure on the part of the Confucian state, with its repressive moralism and ritual rigorism, to produce a happy condition of existence for many.) We can also find traces of geomantic thinking in poetry and art, though the flow of influence might have been the other way around, or the experience of land itself might have been the originary matrix from which all else flowed.

Geomancy seems to be a good source for the exploration of the archetypes of terrene imagination at work in the Korean mind in its imaginative and practical projects. A diffuse and complicated body of lore, it is of course not easy to summarize and especially to make it meaningful in modern terms. But the archetypal design of a geomantically auspicious place can be rather easily deduced: It is normatively an expanse of a valley placed within a system of concentric mountain ranges; in the case of a grave, or even in siting the village, with what is called *hyol*, an imaginary hole at the center of the whole arrangement, which holds earth energies concentrated together² [*Illustration 1]. This is the basic shape and lay of land we can see in the manuals of geomancy, but the influence of the geomantic thinking is so pervasive, as observed above, that there is no topographical description without its trace. A passage from a landscape poem by Pak Inro (1561–1642), extolling the beauty and comfort of the poet's place of retreat may be quoted to illustrate the influence and to give some flavor of the symbolic language of geomancy.

I climb a high hill and look about in four directions:
The land is laid with the Black and the Red Birds,
The Dragon on the left and the Tiger on the right,
Where the mountains cease, there sits a hut, like a snail,
Among the tangled green vines, held up with sticks,
Sheltered from the winds and looking to the sun.
The mountains are to the back and the waters in front,
Five willow trees standing by the river...³.

The description of the land in the above is done in terms of the symbolic language of emblematic animals, Birds, the Dragon, and the Tiger, designating mountains; the advantage of the sunny location sheltered from the winds, the mountains in the back and the river in front are all prescribed by geomancy. The same geomantic configura-

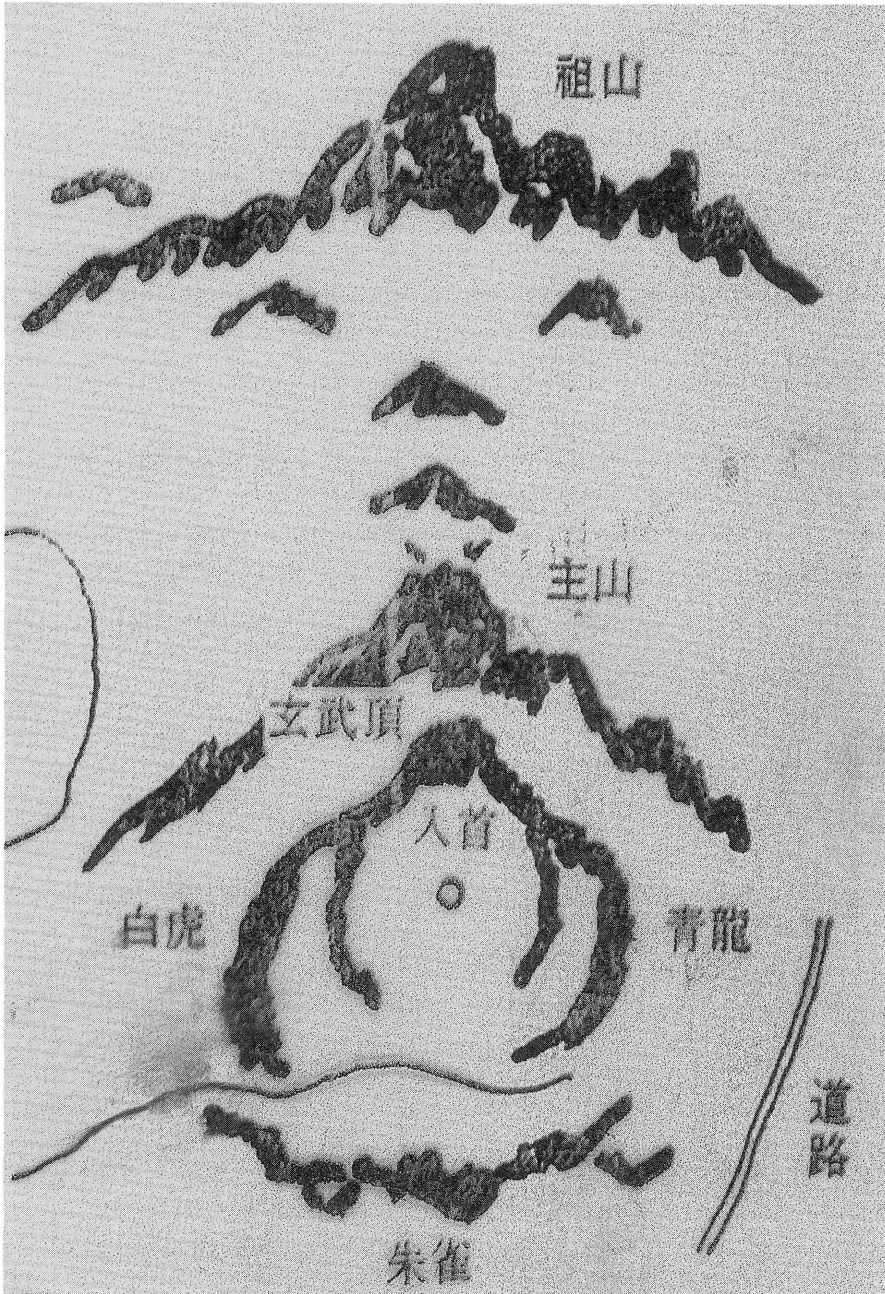


Illustration 1

tion also forms a central design of reference in such a book as *Taekrichi, The Book of Livable Places*, an eighteenth century geography book, which surveys the Korean peninsula for the purpose of reviewing its localities for their qualifications as livable places (*kageuchi*) far from the madding politics of the dynasty; the geomantic

prescription is central in a book like *Taekrichi* which is concerned with possible superior conditions of living in a very realistic sense.

The prescribed configuration of land in geomancy no doubt combines various influences and considerations. There are metaphysical underpinnings to geomancy as it speaks of the harmony of the five elements and the flow of *ch'i* that could make a certain location a place of magical power. As geomantic speculations are said to center on the four factors of "the mountain, water, points of the compass and the human element," and these are often talked about as if they concerned defense, protection from winds, water supply, the advantage of the sun in cold weather, the realistic merits of a certain kind of terrain must have entered into the speculations.⁴ Also, there may be in its lore residues of myths and legends, such as the myth of immortals inhabiting places of natural beauty, the legend of the immortal, who was found to be living in a jar constituting a world by itself by a Fei Chang-fang, and is sometimes referred to as *hosun*, the immortal of the jar, as the story is told in *Shenhsianchuan*,⁵ or Tao Yuan-ming's story of the Peach Blossom Spring. These possible influences come together to suggest the kind of the topographical configuration we have summed up in the above.

But the real source of the attraction exerted by the land thus configured may be psychological. A psychoanalytical approach will not find it hard to conceive of it as carrying sexual suggestions,⁶ or as having traces of the infantile memory of mother, similarly to Erich Neumann's interpretation of the monumental female figures of Henry Moore, which he sees as combining maternal images with the features of landscape.⁷ Yet the psychology of a geomantic landscape may be more broadly interpreted than in narrow psychoanalytical terms of sexuality or maternal memory. Ernest G. Schachtel, in *Metamorphosis*, which attempts to sketch a general theory of human development, notes in the growing process of a person two fundamental tendencies, in constant tension with each other, one of which he calls "the embeddedness principle," representing the desire to remain in the protected environment of the early infancy, and the other "the transcendence principle of openness towards the world and of self-realization which takes place in the encounter with the world."⁸

The emphasis on the enclosed nature of the auspicious place in the geomantic or geographic description certainly seems to speak of an embeddedness principle, a general tendency of man to withdraw to a protected condition of existence, prefigured in the maternal womb. Curiously enough, however, besides what could stand for the regressive tendency of withdrawal into the womb, there is invariably in the geomantically auspicious configuration of terrene features a prescription for expanding ranges of mountains, often not directly but symbolically present, or inac-

cessibly remote and fading away into the horizon of a particular place of choice. In the auspicious place, there ought to be a *chusan*, the main mountain, which is seen to be relayed by way of a *choson*, the ancestor mountain, to the entire system of the mountain ranges of the peninsula radiating from the Paektu Mountain, the sacred mountain, which is also hypothetically related to the mountain systems of China.⁹ A similar suggestion of further ranges, now in the downward direction, as it were, is also contained in the concept of the *choson*, the courtier mountain, lying to the horizon, as if paying respect to the *chusan* and its system. The system of *choson*, *chusan* and *choson* may have been influenced by the hierarchical order of the monarchical society, but, if it were, it must be just one of the causes overdetermining it.

At this point, however, what is important to observe is that the geomantic prescription requires, in an auspicious place, more than enclosedness. *Taekrichi*, more concerned with the question of good places to live where a family could be founded with dynastic continuity and could be supported in its material needs than with places of simply auspicious omen or magical power, still puts a great emphasis on the importance of great natural beauty that must be found in the vicinity of a materially favorable place of habitation, as a source of spiritual consolation or aesthetic satisfaction. "Mountains and waters [that is, landscape] please the spirit and brighten the heart," Yi Chunghwan (1690-1752), the author of *Taekrichi*, writes. "Without their benefit in the place of one's habitation, one lapses into rusticity." But he does not forget to add, "where there is a beautiful landscape, there is often little advantage for a good livelihood; it is not for man to live in the sands like turtles or to eat dirt like earthworms..."¹⁰ By thus ambiguously adding on the spirit-pleasing landscape, Yi Chunghwan is creating a place of eccentricity to the concentric enclosure of a livable place. Psychoanalytically and from the viewpoint of material and psychological advantages, this feature would be difficult to explain unless we think of some such principle as a transcendence principle.

We may say that the requirement of suggested expanded ranges of mountains beyond the place of habitation may meet at least in part the extraversion of human energy to "openness to the world and self-realization which takes place in the encounter with the world." But what is required seems to be more than a worldly openness. The geomantic emphasis on the enclosedness is not to be given up as one moves out to the open world; if further ranges are there, they must be only suggested; not like an opportunity waiting to be taken, but standing and looking, to serve as a suggestion of a realm lying beyond reach. Joseph Campbell has written of the primal myth of spiritual transformation which goes through the cycle of "a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and life-enhancing return."¹¹ The meaning of *Taekrichi*'s eccentric addition to the concentric place of happiness lies in the author's wish to suggest this separation from the world and penetration into a

deeper source of power. The transcendence from the concentric rings is not horizontal but vertical, not this-worldly but otherworldly.

Yet its instruction is not to leave the world, it must be noted at the same time, but to make it more complete. In *Taekrichi*, the separated place of natural beauty adjacent to human habitation is definitely part of the design of the whole. As in the primal myth of the archetypal journey of the hero through heaven and earth joining the microcosm with the macrocosm, there is a return in *Taekrichi* in that its vision is of earthly adequacy, which precisely demands a transcendence to make it complete; in reality, perhaps it may mean simply occasional visitations of a vision of fulfillment enjoyed in a landscape of natural beauty.

The tramontane suggestion of transcendence is more emphatically found in paintings and poetry. *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual* prescribes that a good *sanshui* painting must contain suggestions of places that look inaccessible: among “the twelve things to avoid” in landscape painting is, says *The Manual*, the depiction of “scenes lacking any places made inaccessible by nature.”¹² Yet this inaccessibility may not be merely a property of what lies beyond this world, in the realm of the unknown. It is, once again, in this world and out of it, as a guarantor of the possibility of a totality.

But the paradox of the design is more easily depicted in poetry. In some poetic depiction of the experience of landscape, the extramundane suggestion does not set a metaphysical fringe area to the pleasure of landscape so much as point to the possibility of the mystic incorporation of the whole, landscape, real and metaphysical, in an intense poetic ecstasy experienced here and now. In Korean classical literature, the outstanding example of the depiction of natural beauty would be Chong Chol (1536–1593)’s *Kwandong byolgok* (*The Song of the Region beyond the Eastern Pass*) where the pleasure of natural scenery is carried to the ecstatic fusion with landscape and with the starry universe.

Especially to the point is the concluding part where the rapid journey through the land, with all the obligatory references to the auspicious features of mountains and waters, as if to touch all the geomantic and cartographic totality of the land, launches the poet finally into cosmic space and vision. It is the end of the mountain journey that leads the poet to make a cosmic leap, but there is also evasive rhetoric that makes it unclear whether this cosmic leap is meant literally or considered as something achieved by the main force of visionary energy welling up in the poet. The literal or visionary experience is, in any case, mediated by the beauty of the scenery he sees, and especially by the spectacle of the fury of the whales whose blowing and rolling seems to strike against the skies, causing the miracle of mid-May snowfall; the whale probably being the marine version of the dragon, the chthonic

reptile turning into a uranic power in the midair; and the momentary vision of the dragon yields to a suggestion of a composed erotic rendezvous with the moon and the translunar immortals.

Journeys have their end, pleasures of nature endless.
My heart is full; the traveler's regrets overflow.
Shall I unmoor the raft of the immortals
And sail to Altair in the Constellation of Aquila?
I cannot look into the roots of Heaven, must be content
With a climb to the Pavilion of Sea Prospect and ask,
"Beyond the sea is Heaven; what is beyond Heaven?"
I see now the whales in their frenzy. They blow,
Roll and play in confused tumult. As if silver mountains
Tumbled down, falling over the six parts of the universe,
What is this white snow in the long skies of May?
Soon the night comes and the waves are lulled;
As I wait for the bright moon to rise inches from me,
Coming up over the Divine Tree in the East Sea;
Do I see or not, a long shaft of auspicious light?
I raise the pearl screens and sweep the jade stairs,
And sit up for the morning star when I find
A sprig of white lotus, Ah, sent by whom? I wonder.

After this preparation for a suggested erotic encounter, the poet drinks with the moon and falls asleep to dream a last scene of consummation in which he drinks with the immortals from the other world and comes to know his putative identity as a fallen immortal himself.

Lying down with the pine roots as my pillow,
I fell into a doze, and in my dream I saw an immortal,
Who said to me, "Don't I know you? You are
An immortal from the upper world, now exiled,
Having misread a letter in the Book of Yellow Court,
Now languishing among men for our upper world.
Stay and drink this." Holding the Dipper, he poured
The Eastern Sea into my cup. After three or four cups,
I felt a breeze under my armpits lifting me up,
As if I could fly into the vast void of nine thousand li.
"We would bring this drink to the four seas
And make all humanity drunk, and we'd meet then
To drink together again," thus ending his words,
He flew up to the void on the back of a crane,

The music of the jade flute sounding in the midair;
Did I hear it yesterday or the day befor eysterday?

The poem ends with the poet's return from his cosmic vision to the earthly landscape:

Awakened from the dream, I look to the sea;
I cannot fathom its depth nor its end; the moon alone is
Bright on a thousand mountains and ten thousand valleys.¹³

The fact that Chong Chol's cosmic vision ends in a sort of palinode confirms the immanent anchoring of his vision in this world; Chong Chol clearly recognizes that there is something artificial and contrived in his vision of cosmic ecstasy, as is evident in his hedging maneuvers at the point of entrance into the vision, and now his return to the earth is firmly established. In general, we may say that, in the old Korean thinking, landscape is the entelechy of place, but one attained here and now; geomantically and geographically auspicious places are good places to live in mundane senses but the meaning of good places is fulfilled in good landscape, which is then folded back into good places. The vision of landscape remains an aesthetic vision rather than a mystic one.

3

If there is a mystic element in the vision of landscape, it is more emphatically an element in our mundane experience; the mysticism is a postulate for the possibility of earthly fulfilment. The aesthetic experience of landscape starts almost as quotidian experience. When Walter Benjamin, to illustrate the concept of what he calls aura, evokes an everyday experience of a mountain, he is speaking about the aesthetic effect of a good landscape: "If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, or of that branch."¹⁴ Benjamin's aura designates a moment when a telescoping of near and far occurs, almost casually, as what is far and remote dissolves in the immediacy of perception: distance collapses into immediacy. In another place, Benjamin called it "the unique manifestation of a distance."¹⁵ The aura is certainly an experience of a privileged moment, but it is not far from the way we experience the world as we see it as a part and a whole, as is clear in Benjamin's example. The problem with modern life is we feel thwarted too often in this natural sense of the world.

This sense was, in the pre-modern times, worn more lightly, gratuitously and consistently. It was a natural part of the sensory equipment of man in his everyday life. The pre-modern narrative usually begins with an initial mise-en-scene in terms of a general overview, often with the scene of action set in a full topographical com-

position of place, which sometimes includes symbolically important landmarks; for example, as in the reference to five symbolic mountains found in the opening scene of the eighteenth century Korean romance, *The Dream of Nine Clouds*, which begins:

The five sacred mountains of China are Mount T'ai in the east, Mount Hua in the West, Mount Heng in the south, another Mount Heng in the north, and Mount Sung in the center. Mount Heng in the south is the highest of them...

Only after this overview of land is introduced the time and one of the characters: "In the time of the T'ang dynasty, an old monk from India..."¹⁶ The same kind of overall land sense seems to have been common even in less elevated occasions of life. Composing, in the course of performing bureaucratic duties, an official communication about the repair work that needs to be done of a local academy, the philosopher Yi Toegy (1501-1570), as a county magistrate, begins it with an overall survey of the whole terrain that sounds like a verbal landscape painting:

River Chukkae has its source on the slope of the Sobaek Mountains, from which, flowing through the town of Sunhungbu where the illustrious scholar of Koryo Anhyang used to have his dwelling, it reaches the village, deep-set in a secluded nook where clouds hover in a peaceful valley. In this valley gathered a group of scholars who sought, far from the strife of the worldly crowd and retreating to the leisurely fields and quiet waters, to purify the will, study the Way and discipline the work of their life...¹⁷

This overall territorial sense carried by pre-modern man, reinforced by culture, was naturally spilled over to something like mysticism in Taoist paintings or in such work as *Kwandong byolgok*, merging with a more elevated sense of land manifest in the appreciation of real or artistic landscape. Or conversely, the elevating landscape sense of land was part of the everyday sense of land.

Nevertheless, if what we see in the landscape poems is a sense of the totality of a given terrain, this aspiration for totality, for a felt and qualitative sense of the whole, is easy to take on a supernatural coloring, but it should be noted that this is often inextricably entwined with more mundane aspects of life. Probably this entwinement is more easily seen in landscape painting, which may be considered to be a more natural medium for conveying a totalistic sense of land, in that it can more easily translate this sense into a visually representable quantitative expansion, which in turn allies itself with a proto-scientific impulse in geomancy or in archaic cartography. Landscape painting, while suggesting, as it is supposed to do in the romantic conception of Asian landscape painting, a qualitative and mystical totali-

ty, very often incorporates some conceptual scheme worked out from a proto-scientific geographical understanding of land.

But one paradoxical result of this is that a landscape painting is not always directly available as immediate experience to the eye unsuspecting of its penetration by ideas and schemes coming from the pragmatic epistemic organizations of life peculiar to East Asia. This is in a way merely to say that Asian landscape painting is, as any other kinds of art works in any part of the world, a cultural product with its own special conventions, but it is also to note that probably in the Asian tradition the aesthetic and pragmatic sense of land was more of a piece than in other traditions. I have spoken of the aural experience of Benjamin, and suggested that it was more readily available to the pre-modern Korean, but I must revise it to say that it would not be too easy for modern man, alien to the pre-modern mentality, to have a direct experience of landscape in the same way as the pre-modern Korean, even in viewing a *sansuhwa* (*sanshuihua*, *sansuiga*), since it was as part of a larger mental set of the pre-modern man which included geomantic speculations and other conceptual tools of the times. The aural or lived experience, represented in the landscape, would, if it were to become available again, require interpretation or translation back to experience from the conventions and codes of the past culture, according to which art transformed the lived experience into significant expressions, just as geomancy, though an analogical evolution from the originary experience of land, requires translation back to lived reality. If landscape painting represents the aural experience of land in an immediate way, it does so to the extent that it is the art of the whole; unlike, say, in the genre painting of flowers and birds that focuses the painterly attention on painstakingly delineated details in isolated relief, it gives an overview of a large tract of land, which is the case in any landscape painting, either in the East or in the West. It is concerned with lending a visual reality to the total sense of land one comes to have or imagines to have, thanks to the excitement of natural beauty. But this comes to be exaggerated in some Asian landscapes—in a conceptual schematization as when the sense of expansiveness is carried to the degree that mountains and waters become a panorama beyond all possibility of rational projection. It is in this unprojectible panorama that we realize how much ideological and conceptual elements is part of the landscape. For, in spite of the claim that it could be a credible expression of lived experience, it is as much a schematic elaboration of what might have been originally given as a lived experience. A good illustration of landscape both as a lived experience and a conventionalized schema would be Chong Son (1676–1759)'s *Kumgang chondo* (*The Complete Picture of the Diamond Mountains*), which aspires to render the entirety of its reputed twelve thousand peaks in one integrated visual scene [*Illustration 2].

The Diamond Mountains is, realistically speaking, an impossibility. That is

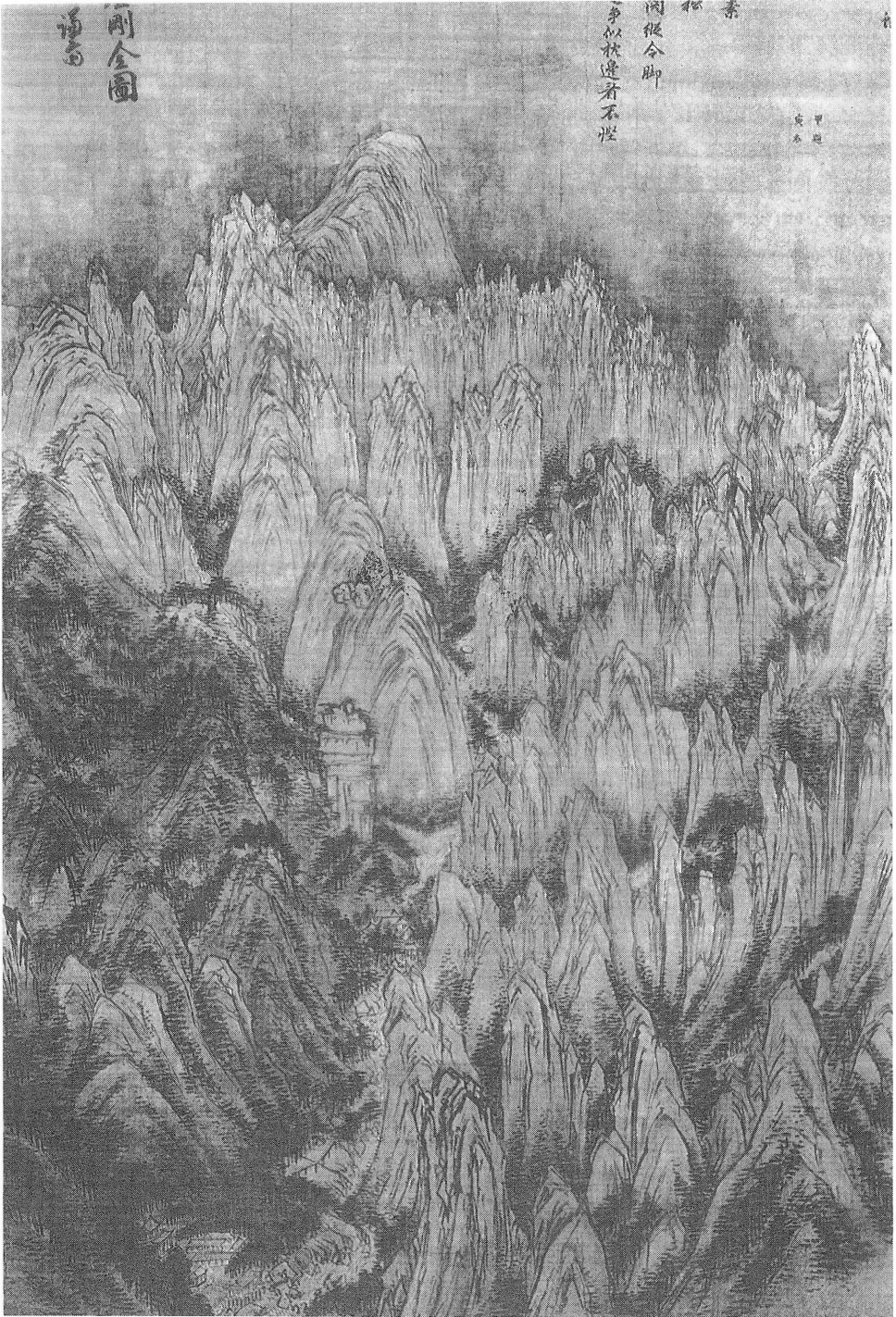


Illustration 2

so, if we try to interpret it as a projection of an experience simply at the visual plane; for we cannot conceive of a viewpoint which would make it projectible as a plausible visual experience in the real world. Here, in saying this, we are trying, of course, to construe it largely, but not entirely, with the Western principle of perspective painting. To repeat a commonplace, the perspective constructed according to mathematical principles is the principal method of organizing pictorial space in the Western tradition since the Renaissance. Difference in the organization principle in East Asian landscape painting has been noted, and that difference would apply to Chong Son's painting. The most salient point in that difference would be the position of the eye. To simplify, the Western perspective is a visual arrangement made from a fixed monocular point of view, while East Asian painting is said to have multiple points of view or a moving point of view. But a more appropriate characterization seems to be a kind of an embedded eye suggested in French geographer Augustin Berque's judicious understanding of *sansuihua* when he says that to represent the three depths (*san yuan*) in the Chinese *sanshui*, "instead of integrating space according to the unique viewpoint as in 'legitimate construction,' the point of view moves to the middle of the landscape."¹⁸ This move of the point of view is supposed to do more justice to the lived reality of landscape, but still it remains a convention, acceptable only to the true believer, and it would be indulging in the naive mystification of Asian painting to take this at its face value without some decoding, as observed in the above. As E. H. Gombrich has convincingly argued in *Art and Illusion*, no art represents raw reality, free of conventions or schemas peculiar to a tradition. Asian painting is in a way more schematic than Western painting, though it is possible to say that the initial assumption made for the schematic elaboration is closer to the originary experience. The important point is that the eventual schematic elaboration ends up by departing from it as much as any other spatial organization does. Returning to Chong Son's painting, it is truer, in a sense, to the lived experience of place, as it can be taken as rendering a global sense, of landscape, that is, in its conceptual scheme, though it may not be easy to project in a legitimate construction; and this conceptual scheme is not what is immediately sensed but what is planned according to a conceptual understanding of the topography of the mountains, and yet we must say that the concept of a thing is just as much part of our experience of it as the immediate perception, and in that sense the painting, combining the two ways of knowing the mountains, truly represents a total experience of the mountains. Also, we may note that the painting, besides the schematic elaboration of the experience of the mountains, includes additional elements, among which utopian fantasies as part of our sense of land. For it probably depicts the Diamond Mountains, not only as a real place but as the mythical Bongraesan, which is, in fact, another name for it, though the name, Diamond



Illustration 3

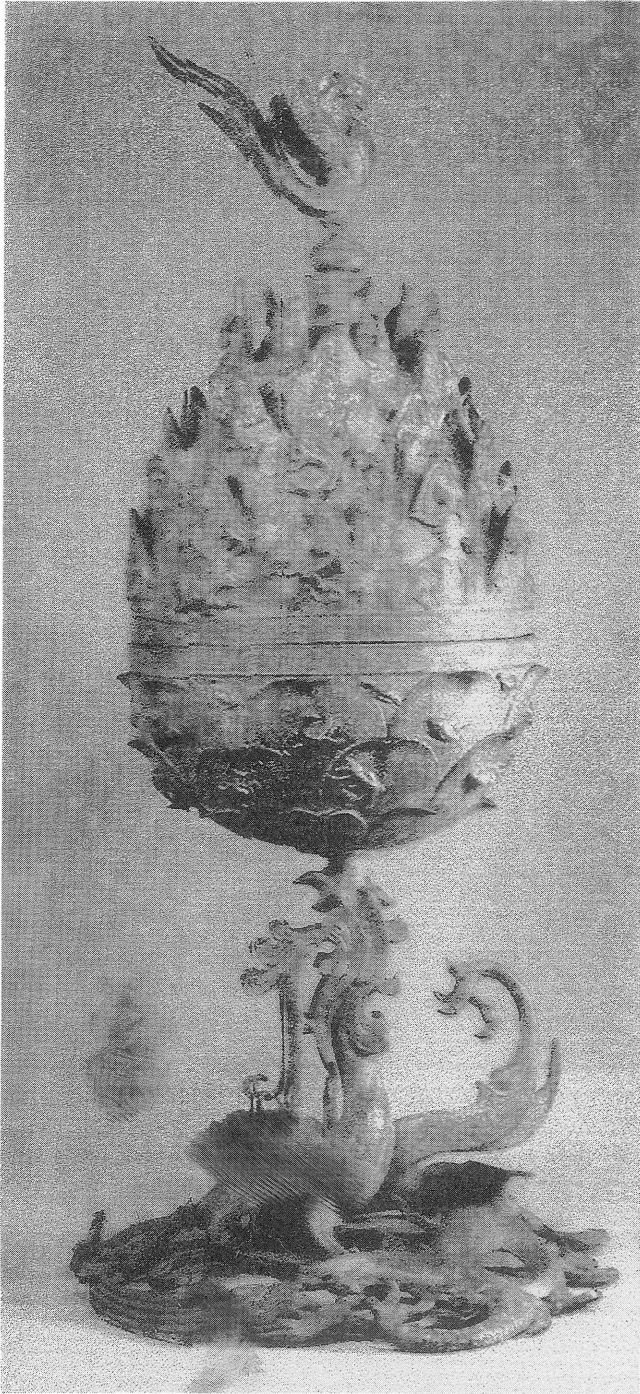


Illustration 4

Mountains, is already mythical.¹⁹ It is not an accident that it resembles other depictions of Penglaishan, the mountain of the immortals in Chinese mythology, for example, as in the sculpted peaks in the *Poshan hsianglu* from the Han dynasty [*Illustration 3] and also in another similar object from a Paekche tomb excavated in 1993 [*Illustration 4]. The resemblance to an ideal mountain is not merely a quotation of a mythically stylized form but it is intended as a reference to the mythical archetype and, through it, to a similar psychological condition of the ecstatic enjoyment of landscape as depicted in *Kwandong byolgok*. To sum up, *The Diamond Mountains* is an artistic construction on the model of, as it were, a palimpsest consisting of the mythic mountains of the immortals, the real and aesthetic experience of the Diamond Mountains and the cartographic schema coming from the general Korean epistemic regime of terrene perception.

4

It is nevertheless true, I would say, that a painting like *The Diamond Mountains* purports to convey, in spite of the conceptual scheme underlying it, the felt reality of land as a holistic experience. The focus is on the experience rather than on the realistic representation of physical reality. This is entirely in conformity with the conventions of composition and reception in East Asian landscape painting. We may quote again Berque's characterization where he emphasizes the holistic approach with its emphasis on inner processes, assumed in the composition of a *sanshuihua*, which contrasts, he thinks, with the objectifying approach in Western painting governed by Cartesian dualism.

Here [that is, in *sanshui*] is no dualism, no Cartesian *intuitus* (gaze) of the subject on the object, and even no gaze upon the landscape; it is within him that the painter carries the landscape; he expresses it, as a long preparatory experience (that is, asceticism) and meditation have made it possible for him to be permeated with its breath (*ch'i*), its rhythm (*yun*) and its correspondences (*hsiang*), which out of the multiplicity of entities make up a harmoniously and organically integrated order. The movement of the brush responds to natural rhythms, and the painted work follows the harmonies with which the universe resonates.²⁰

The important point in Berque's description of the technique of Chinese landscape painting concerns the psychological processes involved; it is, rather than an attempt at objective rendering of visual impressions, creation from inside as the landscape impinges on the psychological processes of the painter: it is an attempt to recreate a total experience of nature. This can be seen even in the impulses that motivate the painterly intentions. As James Cahill reports, the early fifth century

Chinese artist Tsung Ping “painted on the walls of his room the landscapes he remembered from the travels of his more robust years, so that he could reexperience the spiritually elevating sensations that roaming among mountains and rivers has inspired in him,” and the eleventh century Kuo Hsi also had the same sentiment: “The man of high principle . . . cannot easily shake off his responsibilities to society and his family and live as a recluse in the mountains, although he may want to do so,” and hence his desire to paint forests and streams and have them hung in his room as paintings.²¹

These intentions of the painters to re-create the experience in nature were also shared by the viewers, who, instead of assessing the objective images, liked to re-create on their own, in the medium under their command, what might have been the original experience projected by the brush strokes on the screen. An Hwijun and Yi Byonghan have published some time ago a monograph on An Kyon’s *Mongyudowondo (Dream Wanderings in the Peach Blossom Spring)*, a fifteenth century Korean painting, now in Tenri University, Tenri, Japan, wherein are included twenty-three poems of appreciation written by diverse hands. They are not art criticism, but attempts to retrace and re-create in poetry the original experience the painter projected on the screen. To sample it, we may take a brief look at a part of So Kjong (1420–1488)’s poem where he writes on the painting as if he is trying to enter the scene of the painting, examining the details and dreaming events around them:

The ticking of the water clock is slow;
In the painted pavilion sleeps a man,
The stars shining cold in the night sky.
Thoughts are sweet as in the immortals’ hills,
As strange things of the world crowd his pillows.
There is silence on the house in the deep valley
Among the bamboos, and sweet are the fragrant petals
Mirrored in the stream. I wake from my dream,
But I know the world of immortals are nearby.

In the passage quoted above, the author’s dream in the Peach Blossom Spring ends in the confirmation of the proximity of the transcendental realm of the immortals, though the end of the poem becomes a recantation as he laments: “I would be a hermit, but where is the money/with which I could buy a mountain?”²² But the point of quoting from the poem is to illustrate the emphasis given, in the receptive appropriation of the painting, to the psychological processes, to the need for *Nacherleben*, not objective analysis.

The psychological orientation noticeable in the creation and reception of

paintings may be considered too subjective and therefore self-indulgent, which may be true to some extent, but it is also possible to say that these landscape paintings are trying to re-create a more primordial reality of man's insertion into the world. William James thought that the primordially given in man's experience of space is "an element of voluminousness," "a feeling of crude extensity."²³ This voluminousness is more like a large amorphous blob of impressions, memories and desires evoked in the mind than objectively rendered physical features. From the experience of this voluminousness of spatiality, real more in the mind than in its objective existence, take off the utopian or eudaimonic fantasies of the landscape painters and poets: the very ground of exultation in them is, I suspect, the experience of totalistic union with nature and the world discovered through the complex mode of existence of voluminous spatiality. This totalistic union is not always the subject of landscape paintings, but it is latently there, as we can see in *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual's* normative prescription of the inaccessible place, and of course it is sometimes graphically represented in such a painting as Chong Son's *The Diamond Mountains*.

The obligatory reference to this totalistic experience, patent or latent, in landscape suggests from a different angle that it is not a special kind of experience, something extraordinary added to our life otherwise dull and undisistinguished; it is only a specially marked development from the mode of experiencing the world normative in the cultures and societies where these landscapes were produced. This is to say again that it was part of the general epistemic regime of society. This would be confirmed once again if we see that the landscape way of rendering spatiality is probably a corollary, manifested even in small technical details, such as the method of spatial organization, resulting from the general epistemic regime of a civilization that tended, even in its utmost theoretical elaboration, towards, as I said earlier, something similar to the Levi-Straussian science of the concrete; just as it is possible to say that the perspective invented in the West as a convenient way of representing space is a parallel development with the general rise of the scientific way of looking at the world.

One of the central problems of painting is, needless to say, that of how to create a sense of three dimensional space on two dimensional pictorial space; in the words of the authors of *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual*, "on the flatness of the picture plane, to achieve depth and space."²⁴ There are various ways of creating the illusion of spatiality, manipulating the sizes and nature of objects being depicted, the amount of ink applied, variation in brush strokes and washes, etc., but of all these the most important is manipulating points of view to create the illusion of depth. In Chinese landscape painting, there are three ways of doing it: *kao yuan* (high distance), *shen yuan* (deep distance) and *p'ing yuan* (level distance). When

these effects of distance are absent, making painting appear flat, it will be a real disaster, the Manual authors declare, resulting in the loss of all respectability: "When these faults [of flatness] are made in a landscape painting, they are like vulgar and shallow characters, or like runners and menials (who are crude and insensitive). When the hermits in these pictures see such things, it is enough to make them abandon their families, flee their huts, and, holding their noses, run away as fast as they can."²⁵ The significance of the inaccessible places in landscape or views of mountains receding into the far sky or into the misty void may also be regarded as a technique of creating illusion of spatiality. They are ultimate markers signifying that space goes on without end, or, in other words, we may say that spatiality, so to speak, comes into its essence only when it becomes infinite; the presence of inaccessible places is the guarantor of spatiality in landscape painting, with their suggestions of infinite distance and eventually the transcendental realm beyond mortal reach.

This problem of pictorial space in Asian landscapes can be compared with a similar problem in the Western tradition. Though there are, in Western painting too, things that could be done, to suggest space, with objects, colors, and compositional techniques, but space became stabilized as an elemental background for all depicted objects and events at one stroke with the perspective construction invented in the Renaissance. In a perspectival painting, space subsists as a serene and supreme presence, almost never disturbed by whatever the painter does with his object of depiction, as it is neatly ordered in mathematical exactitude, while the vanishing point plays a significant role, though it may not be always directly visible, as the guarantor, like the inaccessible places in Asian landscape, of the infinite continuum of space. The Western perspective is an innovation in pictorial technique, but, as Erwin Panofsky argued in his seminal study of Western perspective, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, it is a development that proceeded along with the discovery of space in mathematics and science as a continuum extending to all directions without limit, uniform, homogeneous, infinite, and mathematically measurable.

One interesting point for its parallel with the imperative of infinite space in Asian landscape painting is the revelation of space as infinite, now become a totality without any outside to it. (Space seems to require, in the West as well as in the East, to be seen as an infinite continuum, to be properly conceived.) One effect of the perspective which made it possible to enclose everything in an infinite container was that space did away with any need for transcendence, and as Panofsky says, as a consequence, "vision of the universe, so to speak, detheologized." Before that, infinity was conceivable, for philosophers like Scholastics, "only in the shape of divine omnipotence, that is in a *hyperouranios topos* (place beyond the heavens)."²⁶ Now one could do away with the divine and transcendental and, paradoxically, at the same time bring it down closer to the world. The transcendental becomes immanent, in

earthly space, but also in the subject of visual experience. While “perspective seals off religious art from the realm of the magical...from the realm of the dogmatic and symbolic,” it makes it a direct experience of the beholder, “in that the supernatural events in a sense erupts into his own, apparently natural, visual space and so permit him really to ‘internalize’ their supernaturalness.”²⁷ What is to be noted is the ultimate twist and reversal in the success achieved through perspective in bringing down the transcendental down to the earth, for it was done by a subject looking through a window and organizing his visual field according mathematical principles; that is, the principles, however objective, that come from the subject. This means in the final analysis that the subject can create space from where he stands, wherever he goes, and therefore, he does not have to worry about space as long as he has in his subjectivity the rules of perspectival construction.

Strategies for creating spatiality were quite different in Asian landscapes and in the Asian mind, as I have already suggested. Space had to be suggested as locales of extensivity here and there that could be viewed and felt, eventually coinciding in a general undefined way with the whole of the pictorial space, as it does in Western perspectival painting, though not so neatly and completely. It could not establish itself, however, as an abstract container of things, stable, taken for granted and always available, regardless of things contained in it. It was more a function of concrete things being attended to and depicted. It was more like what Panofsky calls the aggregate space of the Greeks to whom “space was...perceived not as something that could embrace and dissolve the opposition between bodies and nonbodies, but only as that which remains, so to speak, between the bodies.”²⁸ However, the bodies that had special significance for Asian landscape painters were objects in nature, especially, the sublime features of the earth as represented by mountains and waters, as they indicated what obviously extended beyond man, potentially into the infinite and the transcendental, but also as they inspired in them an aesthetic emotion close to a religious ecstasy in the presence of the numinous. Yet the important point to note is that these sublime features of earth were very much part of their everyday life; in fact, throughout the geomantic literature, we find the emphasis that the good mountains, while they should inspire some separateness from worldly life, should present more mild, benevolent-looking rounded features than austere, forbidding, awe-inspiring features. If they represented a kind of transcendental realm, they were transcendental both in the sense that they suggest a realm beyond the human world, such as the world of immortals, and in the epistemological or Kantian sense that they represent a constitutive principle, prior to experience, but operative in it, making it possible—here like the principles of perspectival construction.

5

Landscape was a principle for planning of pictorial space, but it was also an important marker in the construction of place in Asian culture, including its practical culture. Isn't practicality implied even in the style of drawing prominent in landscape painting, with its way of strongly marking the outline, rather than the texture, of things traced by an instrument of painting which is also for writing, for signifying, not for representation: the brush? Writing about the Soochow painters of the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, Cahill notices the resemblance of their landscapes to "picture-maps, such as one finds printed by woodblock in the local gazetteers,"²⁹ though they are far from being the realistic representations of the Soochow mountains that served as the source of inspiration. They might as well have been the maps or might have shared the same origins. If there was, for all the impression of the otherworldliness, this practical connection in landscapes, the practical relation with land was in turn informed in great part by the aesthetic sense of land as represented in landscape painting. Practicality and the aesthetic existed interpenetrating each other. They met in the archaic science of geomancy, though it presented itself as a serious performance in practicality alone. The interpenetration also accounts for such an oddity as more than thirteen hundred poems included in the official geographical survey of Korea, *Tongguk yochi sungram* (*A Superior Survey of Land in the Eastern Country*), completed in 1484 under the royal order. We noted that *Taekrichi*, purporting to be a practical guide for finding livable places, devotes a great deal of space to aesthetically satisfying landscapes, which both lifts these places up into a spiritual realm, and provides guiding clues for earthly habitation. In a sense, a painting like Chong Son's constitutes a quintessential expression of the traditional, not simply aesthetic, but geographical sense. The title of Chong Son's painting *Kumgang chondo*, which I translated as *The Complete Picture of the Diamond Mountains*, can in fact be translated as *The Complete Map of the Diamond Mountains*, do standing more often for map than for picture. The style of the schematic elaborations used in the painting carries suggestion of a diagram, though, if it is a diagram, it must be considered a diagram for an ideal place, which enjoys a privileged position in our scheme of apprehension of the terrestrial *Umwelt* of man, imaging forth figures of happiness, while also determining our sense of place in the mundane setting as well. Yet in spite of the interpenetration of the practical and the aesthetic in the Asian sense of place, we may conclude that it is the aesthetic that dominates, if we take the aesthetic to mean things related to our senses; in the case of land and landscape, a concrete sense of place, both practical and spiritual. In this sense, we may say that the aesthetic experience of landscape strongly influenced the symbolically laid cities, villages and houses in pre-modern

Asia, and helped develop such a pseudo-science of ideal places as geomancy, while in the West the mathematization of the world brought about by Cartesian rationalism shaped the aesthetic experience of Western man, the legitimate construction of Alberti working as symbolic form informing rendition of reality in art but eventually in the planning of cities and houses.

Augustin Berque, whom we quoted above, expressed misgivings about the dehumanizing quality of the rational conception of space in the post-Cartesian West, which makes space “*un espace homogène, isotrope et infini: l’espace universel de la ‘construction légitime,’ mathématiquement nécessaire,*”³⁰ and has proposed that by the help of the spatial sense embodied in *sanshui*, which is in his mind more concrete and truer to the psychological and ecological needs of man, we could make a “*transition paysagère*” to a new future, developing a better relationship with land, ecologically more harmonious and aesthetically more satisfying. I cannot be too sanguine about the promise of *sanshui* for a saner relationship with nature (especially if it means, as Berque seems to imply, mostly freedom to engage in post-modernist experimentalism or creation of landscaped gardens in residual urban spaces as shown in a landscape garden near the Otonashi Bridge on the Shakujii River in Tokyo).³¹ *Sanshui* is one element in the whole mentality of a civilization, which makes it difficult to detach it from its matrix, and as such it is itself never a faithful representation of the ordinary experience of brute reality. It has its schematic distortion, shackling mind and nature. It is nevertheless correct to observe that there is a fundamental difference between the two modes of land perception, Western and Asian, and it originates from the deeper roots of civilization with profound difference in epistemic regimes. It may be also true that the Western attitude towards land is informed to a lesser degree by the aesthetic sense of land, that is, the concrete sense of lived reality and more by the Cartesian mathematization of space. It will not be easy, however, to judge which civilization has give man better houses and cities. Yet the ecological disaster now spreading throughout the world must have to do with the loss of the concrete sense of place an ordinary mortal may have in the economically, ecologically and aesthetically satisfying environment, securely established on a good low land guarded by the mountains, near and far. At this point we can only say that different ways of relating to land and imagining ideal places on earth have different merits and demerits, and we can learn from different traditions, and having learned and enriched ourselves in this learning, we may hope to move on to a better future with more felicitously felt and imagined places and more humanly built cities and houses.

Notes

1. Though this is not a place to try to determine the exact nature of geomancy referred to in this paper, it is suggestive to note the distinction Levi-Strauss has tried to make between science and what he called the science of the concrete; for instance, where he differentiates mythical thought, as an offshoot of the science of the concrete, from science in the following terms: "Mythical thought, that 'bricoleur,' builds up structures by fitting together events, or rather the remains of events, while science, 'in operation' simply by virtue of coming into being, creates its means and results in the form of events, thanks to the structures which it is constantly elaborating and which are its hypotheses and theories." (Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966 p. 22.) In other words, in science, it is the generative structure that creates concrete events, but in mythical thought, it is the concrete events that approximate the structure, which may remain beyond the reach of manipulation or conscious generation. There are archetypal patterns in geomantic analysis of terrain, but these patterns are not sufficiently idealized to disembodied abstractions that could be contained in an abstract system of theory. Geomancy seems to stand somewhere between science and mythical thought, but it could generally be considered as leaning more to the science of the concrete.
2. The simplified version here is deduced from the detailed description of the geomantic features of auspicious sites in Choe Changcho, *Hangukui pungsu sasang (Korean Geomantic Thought)*, Seoul: Minumsa, 1984, pp. 21–40.
3. Pak Inro, "Nogaega (*The Song of the Reedy Stream*)" in *Hanguk kojon munhak chonjip, III*, Seoul: Minjokmunhwa yongguso, Korea University, 1993, p. 476.
4. See Choe Changcho, p. 32 and pp. 32–40.
5. The importance of this story in the Korean tradition of the myth of the immortals, along with the Peach Blossom Spring, is pointed out in Yi Yonchae, *Koryosiwasa shinsonsasangu ihae (The Poetry of the Koryo Dynasty and the Understanding of the Myth of the Immortals)*, Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1989, p. 53. Professor Yi quotes landscape poems with reference to the immortal of the jar. One by Kim Kukki begins:
The trees and the rocks mingle;
Winds and the smoke run together.
I seek the sun and the moon in a jar,
And search for immortals in the world.
The water comes down from the peach village... (Ibid., p. 59)
The same motifs of the jar and the peach are also featured in *Taekrichi* where the author quotes a poem by Choe Jon, depicting Kyongpodae, a well-known scenic place on the East Coast on the peninsula, which reads:
Once in the jar in the Bongraesan,
Three thousand years have passed without my knowing.
Now I see the silver sea, vast, clear and shallow;
Having come flying today on the bird of heaven,
To see no one standing under the blue peach tree...
(Yi Chungwan, *Taekrichi*, a modern translation by Yi Iksong, Seoul: Ulyumunhwasa, 1993, p. 179. The original book is conjectured to have been completed in 1751.)
6. The sexually suggestive relations between land and humans have been observed by geomancers themselves. See Choe Changcho, p. 37.
7. See Erich Neumann, *The Archetypal World of Henry Moore*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1959, pp. 16–18. Neumann, along with his own interpretation, cites from

- A. D. B. Sylvester's *Catalogue* for a Moore Exhibition in 1951: "It [The Reclining Figure from 1929] draws an analogy between a reclining woman and a range of mountains which announces the treatment of the female body as a landscape that characterizes most of Moore's later reclining figures."
8. Ernest G. Schachtel, *Metamorphosis: On the Development of Affect, Perception, Attention, and Memory*, New York: Basic Books, 1959, p. 157.
 9. Korea had a strong cartographical tradition as is often observed by Joseph Needham, for example, in his *Science and Civilization in China, Volume III*, Cambridge University Press, 1959, where he treats the earth science in China. It is to be noted that in the old Korean maps there is a great attention paid to clearly marking out the systematic concatenations of mountain ranges, which makes one speculate on the relation between this cartographic feature and the geomantic need to see a place in relation to the totality of mountain ranges as the source of strong earth energy.
 10. *Taekrichi*, p. 196.
 11. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, New York: Meridian Books, 1956, p. 35.
 12. Mai-Mai Sze, *The Way of Chinese Painting: Its Ideas and Technique, with Selections from the Seventeenth Century Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, New York: Vintage Books, 1959, p. 133.
 13. Chong Chol, "Kwandong Byolgok," *Hanguk kojon munhak chonjip, III*, pp. 222-227.
 14. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 222-223.
 15. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, p. 188.
 16. Translation of Richard Rutt in Peter H. Lee ed. *Anthology of Korean Literature: From Early Times to the Nineteenth Century*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981, p. 163.
 17. Yi Hwang, *Hankukui sasang daechonjip X, Yi Hwang*, Seoul: Donghwa chulpansa, 1976, p. 171.
 18. Augustin Berque, "La Transition paysagère comme hypothèse de projection pour l'avenir de la nature," dans Alain Roger et François Guéry, *Maîtres et protecteurs de la nature*, Champ Vallon: Seyssell, 1991, p. 220.
 19. Yi Chunghwan, in *Taekrichi*, marvels at the fact that the Diamond Mountains existing in the east is already mentioned in the Buddhist scripture of *Avatamsakasutra* (p. 157), obviously unable to entertain the idea that, even without the fact of the name having been derived from the same source, the description in the scripture was applied only by an imagined resemblance to the existing mountains.
 20. Augustin Berque, p. 220.
 21. James Cahill, *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Painting*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979, p. 63.
 22. An Hwijoon and Yi Byonghan, *An Kyonkwa mongyudowondo (An Kyon and His Dream Wanderings in the Peach Blossom Spring)*, Seoul: 1991, pp. 271-272.
 23. William James, *The Principles of Psychology, II*, New York: Dover, 1950, p. 134. The phrases are quoted from Edward S. Casey, "'The Element of Voluminousness': Depth and Place Re-Examined," in MC. Dillon ed. *Merleau-Ponty Vivant*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991, p. 1.
 24. Mai-Mai Sze, p. 132.
 25. Mai-Mai Sze, p. 209.
 26. Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, New York: Zone Books, 1991, pp. 65-66. The original German publication was in 1924-1925.
 27. Panofsky, p. 72.

28. Panofsky, p. 41.
29. Cahill, p. 7.
30. "La Transition paysagère," p. 219.
31. August Berque, *Nihonno fukei, Seiono keikan*. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1993. p. 72-82 et passim.