

Translating personality into landscape

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Abstract. This essay stems from a hypothesis which belongs to a work in progress: an attempt to understand and to make translatable into contemporary conceptions the figure of the *anonymous* 隱者 (*yin zhe*) and its formation into a kind of humanistic cipher or an empty interior space sketched like a human being in classical Chinese poetry and Tang and Song painting. The idea is that the correspondence of personality and landscape in Chinese aesthetics replaces its Western counterpart—the relativity of subjectivity and outer *space*. The first part of the essay delineates differences in the approach to landscape or 山水 (*shan-shui*) and emphasizes that the appreciation of both essentially changes as soon as the cultural information does, which makes similarities of certain approaches—as in romantic landscapes and Chinese *shan-shui*—deluding rather than coherent. The last part focuses on a detail in the construction of the *shan-shui* in relation to concepts of personality which I call distance and framing. This combination of an absolute spatial order obtained by distance and its microcosmical, individual correspondence in a personally shaped frame seems the characteristic Chinese way to translate concepts of personality into an aesthetic reality—almost bare of any relation to the physical presence of the subject.

There is nothing more famous for its uniqueness among the genres of Chinese arts than landscape poetry, including its prolongation, landscape painting. But compared to garden architecture, where the Chinese concept of what is called *landscape* in English was partly adapted by the Europeans, the subtle landscapes created by Chinese classical poets and painters were never imitated and processed into successful styles by Western poets or painters. Even the so-called ‘Chinese garden’ is the result of a process departing from a fumbling Western reflection (an exoticistic exploitation) upon a difference whose counterpart coincided with something on the way to becoming more explicit in Europe, although the customs and tradition of the 18th century lacked or overshadowed concepts necessary to realize it. The most essential elements of the Chinese landscape, the *texts* that transformed ‘natural beauty’ (adored as such by European romanticists) into a ‘cultivated or literary ornament’ (文章 *wen zhang*), were mostly ignored or sometimes awkwardly imitated as mere decoration that was far from their power according to Paul W. Kroll’s formula: ‘Word creates World’.¹ For Westerners the attractiveness of Chinese landscape conceptions has never ceased. But its appreciation, by ignoring the differences that emerge from its close and in-

¹ Kroll 1998, 88.