

Theory and Practice: The Double Ponds in Korean Landscape Gardens, 16th to 19th Centuries

Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch (East Asian Art History, Freie Universität Berlin)
E-mail: jeong-hee.lee-kalisch@fu-berlin.de

abstract

The paper deals with the man-made double ponds in Korean garden landscapes and garden depictions from the 16th to 19th centuries of the Joseon period (1392–1910). Based on a well-preserved landscape garden of the Joseon dynasty, this investigation connects neo-Confucian scholars' ideology, the construction concepts of their landscape gardens, and their practice of self-cultivation. Through research on the pond shape and the naming of the ponds, this essay reveals the philosophical and political thoughts as well as the role models of the Joseon literati, and in what way the fish, flowers and plants are involved in the conception of pond building.

Garden landscape reflects the fundamental relation between human beings and nature, and it serves as a place of both subjective practice with the nature and spirited experience in the nature. Accordingly, the garden landscape can be considered the best visualization of one's ideals in life as well as the realization of one's life philosophy concerning nature. Based on the man-made double ponds in Korean Joseon landscape gardens, this study emphasizes the relation between the neo-Confucian scholar's theoretical ideology and their practical lifestyles as a process of self-cultivation. This presentation aims to find out the theoretical connotation of the shape of ponds and its naming, as well as the implication of further elements like fish, flowers and plants involved in the concept of the pond landscape.

During the Joseon Kingdom (1392–1910) of

the sixteenth century, in which neo-Confucian ethics formed the basis of state ideology and life philosophy of the literati, the social elite was divided given the different worldviews and fundamental convictions that prevailed. In times of unsustainable political conditions, many literati retreated to their country abodes out of resignation or loyalty towards their own ideals. Correspondingly, local cultures of social gatherings flourished among the literati in specially established landscape spaces beyond urban court culture.

First in question is the Garden Soswaewon 瀟灑園 located at the foot of the mountain Goamdong 鼓巖洞 in South Jolla province. Afar from the capital, it is regarded as a highlight of the flourishing local cultures at that time.

When his highly venerated teacher, the genuine neo-Confucian Jo Gwangho 趙光祖

(1482–1519), fell from grace in the course of political party disputes, the young literatus Yang Sanbo 梁山甫 (1503–1557), who in turn had just passed the civil service examinations, saw no hope for or sense in a life at the royal court anymore. He gave up his career as an official in the capital Hanyang (present-day Seoul) and returned to his paternal home. During the years 1520–1550, he created his own garden that incorporated natural rock formations and a mountain stream with a waterfall flowing from the northeast to the southwest; from then on calling himself the “Literatus Soswae Living an Unrestrained Life” (*Soswae cheosa* 瀟灑處士). After his penname he designated the garden “Soswaewon”, which connotes: “the garden in which the spirit is purified and invigorated, comparable with the effect of rain in a thunderstorm falling on the leaves of bamboo trees”. Therefore, I would prefer to translate the garden name in a figurative sense “Garden of Vivifying Purification,” signifying its free and unrestrained quality.

The size of the entire complex including a family residency, and inner and outer gardens, amounts to an area of 118,000 square meters, of which approximately 4,400 square meters are taken up by the garden area extant today. Shielded by mountain ranges and rivers near and far and circumscribed by high bamboo groves and stone-clay walls, this garden represents an ideal space according to *fengshui* 風水 understanding. The choice and placement of the buildings and large rocks follow the principles of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 and the Five Elements. Decorative features of plants, trees, and individual stones likewise mirror Taoist and neo-Confucian worldviews, and the social and intellectual background of Yang Sanbo. The garden designer here projected the utopia of his own religious-philosophical ideals; ones that were, moreover, in the spirit of his teacher.

The mountain water, the vein of the landscape and a main element of the garden accumulates in the natural recesses of the rocks and then disperses on a wide stone plateau, finally gushing down into the moss-covered green valley in form of big and small waterfalls. The rushing and splitting of the light-reflective white waterfalls, reminiscent of silk panels, can be best observed from the “Studio of Clearing Wind” (*Gwangpunggak* 廣風閣). The open structure with its small space in the center looks like a bejeweled boat on top of an elevation of stacked stones.

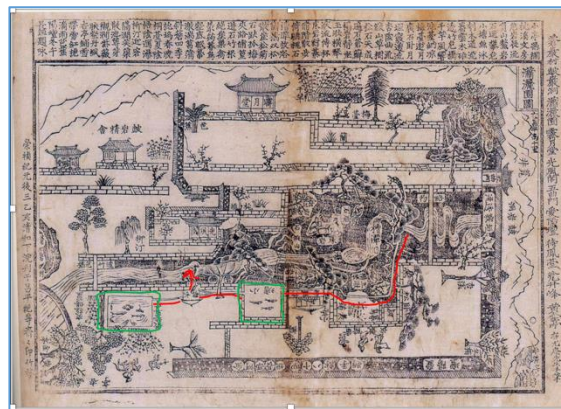


Figure 1. The woodblock print *Soswaewondo* of the year 1755 (© Soswaewon).

On the side opposite of the waterfall and the “Studio of Clearing Wind” and below the thatched pavilion “Terrace of Awaiting the Phoenix” (*Daebongdae* 待鳳臺) which stands boldly upon the stacked stone, are two artificial square-shaped ponds. From the 20th to 24th of April in the year 1574, the scholar Go Gyeongmyeong 高敬命 (1533–1592) took a journey to the beautiful area of mount Mudeungsan with his colleague Yim Hun 林薰 (1500–1584), and described the garden in his travelogue *Yuseoseongnok* 遊瑞石錄 as follows:

[...] Below the pavilion there is a squarely shaped pond. A hollowed-out tree trunk channels the water to the pond. To the west of the ponds, hundreds of bamboos stand there like fields of jade. To the west of the

bamboo there is a lotus pond. The water flows to the pond through channels made by stones. Below the Bamboo thickets, on the north side of the pond, there is a water mill. [...]

亭下鑿小池剝木引澗水注之池西有鉅竹
百挺玉立可賞竹西有蓮池甃以石引小池
由竹下過蓮池之北又有水碓一區. [...]¹

Additionally, the woodblock print *Soswaewondo* 瀟灑園圖 of the year 1755 illustrates how the water flows from the main water stream to the first pond and then to the second pond (fig. 1). There had been a watermill that diverted the continuously flowing water finely into the valley. A poem titled „The Water runs through the Cavity” (*Gomoktongryu* 剝木通流) (1548) (fig. 2) written by Gim Inhu 金麟厚 (1510–1560), a literati friend of Yang Sanbo, describes the water as vein after Chinese cosmological thought:

The vein of the spring runs through the cavity
To a pond on the upper side under the bamboo.
委曲通泉脉 高低竹下池



Figure 2. The Water transfer through the cavity (Photography by the author, 2008).

The first pond, in a rectangular shape and measuring 2.8 x 2.8 m, is located directly under the thatched pavilion (fig. 3). For what purpose was this small pond created?

The first pond reflects the concept of self-cultivation of the noble gentleman in a symbolic way. The garden owner named the pond Yigam 一鑑 (Chin. *yijian*), which means to reflect or to inspect. The term was borrowed from the poem “Thoughts and Feelings after Reading” (*Guanshuyougan* 觀書有感) by the neo-Confucian master Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200). Functioning as a mirror, the pond constantly calls upon oneself to stay attentive and aware.

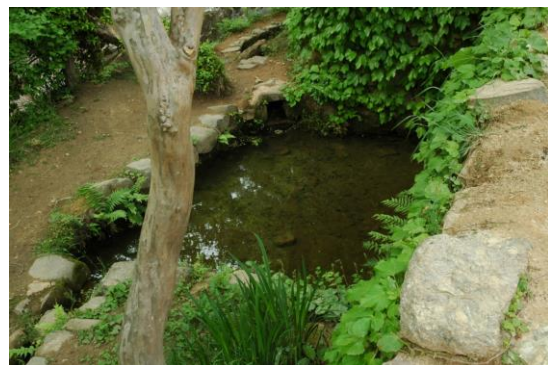


Figure 3. The first pond (Photography by the author, 2008).

It is also said that Yang would sometimes throw a fishing rod into the pond. The poem “Swimming Fish in a Small Pond” (*Sodang eoyeong* 小塘魚泳) by Gim Inhu depicts not only the mirror-like clear water, but also the lifestyle of the literati-recluses in relation to the pond in an empathic way:

The square pond is not even as big as ca. 1,8 m² (*yilmu*),
but it is enough to pick up the clear water.
The fish play in the mirrored image of the garden owner.
So, I have no desire to throw a fishing line.
方塘未一畝 聊足貯清猗
魚戲主人影 無心垂釣絲

This poem indicates the topic of playing fish in a garden. In the eyes of the scholars, the fish

swimming in the water are associated with the emotion of happiness, freedom, and easiness, a condition without any worry or trouble. This is further connected with the hermit life of retreated literati in harmony with nature. As the great Chinese poet Li Bai 李白 (701–762) once observed in admiration the fish in a deep and clear pond, he was filled with the thought of retiring. Fishing is closely related to the reclusive lifestyle; hermits find leisure and tranquility in fishing in a quiet, natural environment. Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770), for example, once built a small pavilion on water for fishing, in the garden of his grass thatched hut in Chengdu. The last verse of the poem “No desire to throw a fishing line” by Yang Sanbo is associated with the lifestyle of a Chinese master, the Grand Duke Jiang (Jiang Taigong 姜太公), who lived in the 11th century BC. It is said that he spent years in his old age fishing, but with a straight hook and without bait. The story describes the lifestyle of a retreated wise man, who was fishing not for a real fish, but the chance to meet a wise ruler. Finally, King Wen 文王 discovered this white-haired fisherman and took him in his coach back to the court. The act of fishing as a part of the recluse-scholar lifestyle echoes the idealized life of Yang Sanbo in his own garden. With the small pond with fish, the young literati scholar expresses his hope that someday there may come again a wise ruler who would restore a peaceful state in the country.

From the first pond flows the water down to the second pond, which is a square lotus pond (fig. 4). Measuring 5.5 x 4.0 m, it is bigger than the first pond.



Figure 4. The second pond (Photography by author, 2008).

The lotus planted into the lower pond presents a reminder of the feelings of love towards the lotus flower that are to be nurtured continuously. Yang was especially fond of the poem “On the Love of the Lotus” (*Ailianshuo* 愛蓮說) by the Chinese Confucian thinker Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073), in which the flower, arising from the mud with its soft fragrance, is defined as one that represents the virtue of a Confucian literati gentleman:

But, I only love the lotus, which grows out of the mud yet is unstained, washed by the water ripples, but is not tantalizing; the stem grows straight and its inside is hollow, and it has no creeping vines and branches; its scent is milder in the distance, its stalk really is clean and upright; it can be enjoyed from a distance, instead of being played in the hands. I say the chrysanthemum is the hermit of the flowers, while the peony is the nobility and wealth of the flowers; whereas the lotus is the gentleman of the flowers. Alas!

予獨愛蓮之出淤泥而不染，濯清漣而不妖，中通外直，不蔓不枝，香遠益清，亭亭淨植，可遠觀而不可褻玩焉。予謂菊，花之隱逸者也；牡丹，花之富貴者也；蓮，花之君子者也。噫！²

Yang Sanbo highly esteemed his Chinese role model, the neo-Confucian Zhou Dunyi, who had defined the lotus with its gentle fragrance rising from the mud as a representative symbolic plant of noblemen. The chosen names of the two buildings “Studio of Clearing Wind” and “Hall of the Moon in Clearing Sky” in Yang’s garden also mirror the garden designer’s aspiration towards the pure virtues of a nobleman; the naming refers to the Chinese scholar Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105), who had compared the refined character of Zhou Dunyi to the clarity of the purifying wind and the bright moon in the sky cleared after rain.

How the scholar Yang loved the lotus flowers is also described in a poem titled “Lotus at a Distance from Mount Stream” (*Gyeokganbuggeo* 隔澗芙蕖) by his friend Gim Inhu, who also applied words from the Zhou Dunyi poem:

With its clean and upright stalk, it is an
extraordinarily plant,
its tranquil appearance can be enjoyed very
well from a distance.
The wind of fragrance comes across the
valley,
brought into the room, it is even better than
the orchids.

淨植非凡卉 閒姿可遠觀
香風橫度壑 入室勝芝蘭

During the Joseon period, Korean neo-Confucian scholars loved the lotus flower and its symbolic meaning. They built mostly quadrangular ponds after Zhu Xi’s poem and planted lotus flowers there. The neo-Confucian academy Namgye Seowon 濫溪書院, which was built in honor of the scholarship of Jeong Yeochoang 鄭汝昌 (1450–1504) has two quadrangular lotus ponds in front of two dormitories (fig. 5).³ One dormitory is called the

“House of Loving Lotus” (*Aeyreonheon* 愛蓮軒) and the other the “House of Chanting Plum Blossoms” (*Yeongmaecheon* 詠梅軒), as plum trees are planted around the dormitories. It suffices to say that the name “House of Loving Lotuses” is one of the most popular names for a pavilion at a pond in literati gardens.⁴



Figure 5. One of the double ponds, The neo-Confucian academy Namgye, Seowon <https://www.orientalarchitecture.com/gallery.php?sid=773&index=2> (Accessed 2017-06-28).

The king Sukjong 肅宗 (1661–1720), in love with lotus, built a pavilion in the back garden of the palace *Changdoekgung* 昌德宮 in 1692, named it *Aeryeonjeong* 愛蓮亭, and renamed the pond by it *Yaeryeonji* 愛蓮池, as the detail of the “Painting of Eastern Palaces” (*Donggwoldo* 東闕圖) shows (fig. 6).⁵

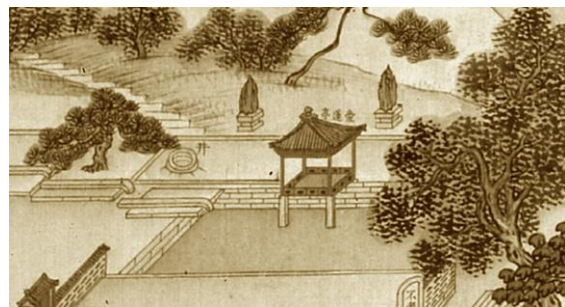


Figure 6. The detail of *Painting of Eastern Palaces* (*Donggwoldo*), dated between 1826 and 1830, ink on paper and silk, Korea University Museum (*Donggwoldo* 1992, p. 141).

A strong self-identification with the lotus pond is displayed in the painting by Jeong Seon 鄭敼 (1676–1759), titled “West Garden with a Small Pavilion” (*Seowon sojeong* 西園小亭, fig. 7).⁶



Figure 7. Jeong Seon (1676-1759), *Yi Chunje's West Garden with a Small Pavilion* (Seowon sojeong), ink and light colour on silk, 40 x 66,7 cm. Private collection (Choe 2005, p. 272).

The depicted garden belonged to the minister and literati scholar Yi Chunje 李春躋 (1692-1761). Jeong Seon illustrates this in the manner of the “true landscape style” (*jingyeong sansu* 真景山水). The high official Yi approaches his pavilion holding a walking stick and wearing a high official's hat. A servant, carrying a zither, follows closely behind. In front of the grass pavilion there is a pond with lotus.

Another painting by Jeong Seon, “Stream of Pure Wind” (*Cheongpung gyedo* 清楓溪圖, fig. 8) (1739)⁷, depicts the former estate of the neo-Confucian scholar and Prime Minister Kim Sangyong 金尙容 (1561-1637), who, after passing the state examinations in 1590, held a high post as prime minister. The “Estate by the Stream of Pure Wind”, which is not extant anymore today, was located on the slope of Mount Inwangsan in the northwest of the capital Seoul. In a long hanging scroll format, the artist renders the estate of Kim Sangyong in a bluish wash, and defines the surrounding, gradually ascending and clearly structured vegetation and rocks from a bird's eye view by using repeated, strong and thick brush strokes (*bubyeokchal-beop* 斧壁擦法). We can recognize many of the elements in the painting which are stated in historical sources: willows, bamboos, many pine trees, elm trees and centuries-old tall cedars and, particularly, three rectangular lotus ponds (*samdang* 三塘). The ponds were

connected so that they could successively be filled with water from the down-flowing stream.



Figure 8. The detail of Jeong Seon's “Stream of Pure Wind” (*Cheongpung gyedo*), 1739, Ink and colour on silk, 133 x 58,8 cm, Kansong Art Museum (Choe 2005, p. 235).

The hanging scroll titled “Banquet of the Elder Officials at the Pond Namji” (*Namji girohoedo* 南池耆老會圖) by the court painter Yi Giryong 李起龍 (1600-?), now in the Seoul National University Museum (fig. 9),⁸ shows the elder official literati's gathering on the 5th of June 1629. They came together to enjoy the lotus at the South Pond (*Namji* 南池) and to call to mind the virtues of a nobleman.



Figure 9. The detail of Yi Giryong's “Banquet of the Elder Officials at the Pond Namji” (*Namji girohoedo*), 1629, ink and colour on silk, 116,6 x 72,4 cm. Seoul National University Museum (Seoul National University Museum Highlights 2007, p. 117).

As discussed above, the Garden of Vivifying Purification has two ponds which are connected with each other. This is a crucial aspect of garden design and was applied in many scholar gardens of the Joseon period.

There are three essential types of garden pond design. The first consists of two ponds of two different sizes, embedded in a natural environment (like in the Garden of Vivifying Purification). The second type entails twin ponds of the same size and shape, built side by side (like in the neo-Confucian academy Namgye Seowon). The third is a mixed type, one example being the garden of the Thatched House of Dasan (Dasan Chodang 茶山草堂), located at the Tea Mountain (Dasan 茶山) in Gangjin District (Gangjin-hyeon 康津縣). The complex belonged to the great Joseon scholar Jeong Yakyong 丁若鏞 (1762–1836), who spent his exile time teaching and writing books. Before being exiled, he enjoyed lotus flowers in his hometown in the Gyeonggi province, in his own very special way: Before daybreak he would already be in a boat on the lotus pond and get as close as possible to the lotus buds. When the flowers blossom at the moment of the daybreak, their strong fragrance fully releases. In this way, he was able to enjoy the lotus flowers to the utmost.

During his exile life, Jeong built two square ponds in the garden of his Dasan Chodang to enjoy the lotus fragrance and the playing fish. Only one pond still exists today. As the painting “Thatched House of Dasan” (*Dasan chodangdo* 茶山草堂圖) by the Buddhist master Choui Seonsa 草衣禪師 (1786–1866) (fig. 10) shows, there were originally two ponds in the garden, connected by a watercourse like those of the ponds in “The Garden of Vivifying Purification.”



Figure 10. Choui Seonsa, “Thatched House of Dasan” (*Dasan chodangdo*), 1812, ink and color on paper, 22.3 x 31 cm. Private collection://silhak.ggcf.kr/archives/exhibit/dasans-disciples-in-the-place-of-exile/초의-그림-다산초당도 (Accessed 2017-06-28).

The two ponds connected by a waterway convey a special symbolic meaning based on a philosophical idea of the Taoist principle of the *dui-gua* 兌卦 (lake or marsh trigram) in the “Book of Changes” (*Yijing* 易經):

[Two symbols representing] the waters of a marsh, one over the other, form Dui. The superior man, in accordance with this, [encourages] the conversation of friends and [the stimulus of] their [common] practice.

兩澤，兌；君子以朋友講習。⁹

According to the “Xiang commentary” (*Xiangci* 象辭),

this is a stack of two exchanges, the exchange is pond (ze 澤), the two ponds are connected, and the exchange of two waters is a feature of the exchange. The gentleman observes this feature, thus making friends, teaching and exploring, and promoting the knowledge.¹⁰

The 58th trigram *dui* 兌 also means openness and better understanding, accepting, and communicating with others.

In other words, the lake or marsh trigram *dui* symbolizes the power with which the forces of

mountain and lake are united in their action. The liquid lake/marsh element symbolizes the exchange between people, the pool of wealth, knowledge or concord between them, as well as the way they mirror each other. In the neo-Confucian Joseon society, this *dui-gua* concept is realized in the construction of the ponds in both private gardens and, for the young scholars, the academy gardens. The double ponds concretely illustrate the space of metaphysical, conceptual thoughts: they are connected with each other through the same vein of a water stream, which symbolizes the method of learning and teaching. Although the two ponds stand independently, as water flows freely from one to the other, both ponds rarely dry up. Likewise, friends who study together grow up together, and achieve their scholarly accomplishments by stimulating and awakening one another.

Conclusion

The garden designer was withdrawn from the political turmoil in his own garden, “The Garden of Vivifying Purification”. The concept of the double ponds systems and the figurative landscape imagery of ponds with plants and fishes in connection with the pavilions reflect the theoretical aspects of Taoist, neo-Confucian life philosophy of the young scholar, as well the way of realizing of his ideology.

Two ponds connected by a waterway. Water flows from the main mountain stream and passes both the ponds and finely rushes down into the valley. On the one hand, they are independent of each other and their functions are different: one pond is stocked with fish and the other with lotus flowers. On the other hand, two ponds are joined together, and this helps to cultivate the mind and delight the eyes. The intertwined space and concept of “two ponds” allowed for the pursuit of higher aims such as “learn together” beyond the everyday life of politics.

Notes

- 1) *Goryeobong Yuseoseongnok*, See Yang, 1995; *Jangseogak* 藏書閣 (Royal Archives), G002+AKS-AA25_24513_007_0001, edited by Hangukhak Jungang Yeonguwon.
- 2) See Dugushici wang 讀古詩詞網 (Chinese Ancient Poetry)
https://fanti.dugushici.com/ancient_proses/70529 (Accessed 2017-06-28).
- 3) Hong/Yi 2010, pp. 383–384.
- 4) It is well known that the neo-Confucian scholar Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501–1570) also loved plum blossoms and planted a lot of plum trees around his dormitory; he also loved lotus so much that he called his studio the “Hall of Loving Lotus” (Aeryeondang 愛蓮堂) after Zhou Dunyi.
- 5) Hong/Yi 2010: p. 29; *Donggwoldo* 1992, p. 140.
- 6) Lee-Kalisch, 2015: pp. 83–103; Choe 2005: pp. 276–77.
- 7) See also *ibid*, 2005: pp. 234–39.
- 8) See YI 2017. 2: pp. 71–103.
- 9) Chinese Text Project, 周易 - Book of Changes, English translation: James Legge. See <https://ctext.org/dictionary.pl?if=en&id=26039&remap=gb> (Accessed 2017-06-28)
- 10) Xu 1991, p. 315. 《象辭》說：本卦為兩兌相疊，兌為澤，兩澤相連，荷兩水交流是兌卦的卦象。君子觀此卦象，從而廣交朋友，講習探索，推廣見聞。

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