

Landscape Image as a Mnemonic Tool in Cultural Change: The Case of Two Phantom Sceneries

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Imagine the following everyday situation. You are in your study and go to fetch something from the kitchen, say, a glass of water. You go to the kitchen, but on the way you forget what it was that you had to bring. Stupefied you stand and stare at the kitchen shelves for some minutes, maybe even have a sandwich out of confusion, but still cannot remember what you wanted. You go back to your room, sit down, look at the things you were looking at before, and suddenly remember: it was a glass of water! Although totally unrelated to the pile of papers you were looking at, the papers have still helped you to remember it.

Or another situation: after 15 long years you go back to a place you used to go to a lot. Many things have changed, but everything you see seems to remind you of something. Some of those things are pleasant, some are most embarrassing – something you preferred to forget a long time ago. Many of the things have disappeared, as well as lots of memories you might have had looking at them. But many other things flood your mind exactly because something is so obviously missing from the scene.

Thinking of these two examples, it should be intuitively clear how the link between landscape and memory works on the individual level. Living in a physical environment, a human being has to make sense of it, conceptualise it and remember it at least partially if he/she is to survive. On the one hand, when human beings move in a landscape, experience different feelings, solve their problems, simply live their lives, it is as if the physical environment witnessed all of it and eventually it feels as if the landscape knows more about you than the surrounding people, from whom much of what we do is hidden. On the other hand, a human being changes the environment in his/her daily activities according to his/her beliefs and values and according to his/her culturally conditioned idea of what a beautiful landscape should look like, binding the landscape explicitly to different events in his/her life. Therefore it is no surprise that environment becomes a major building block of identity and therefore memory.

I think that a culture can here be considered homologous to an individual. A culture's value systems are of course partially conditioned by the possibilities of the environment it exists in (an inhabitant of a desert is likely to have a very different value system connected with water than does an inhabitant of wetlands), but the value system simultaneously determines how a society transforms its landscape. Thus, as Denis E. Cosgrove has shown, different socioeconomic formations create different landscapes (Cosgrove 1984). At the same time, the landscape as it unfolds in front of us is considered to have been shaped by the preceding generations of a given culture (and therefore carries the marks of previous 'events'). Being relatively stable, environment becomes an easy symbol of cultural continuity on the one hand, and a ready structural element for its memories on the other, producing what we know as 'mnemonic sites' – historical monuments, buildings etc. Thus, when the concept and the ideology of 'nationhood' took shape in European cultures under the influence of the ideas of Romanticism, the landscape and the language turned out to be those elements around which new identity was shaped.¹ As Svend Erik Larsen put it (Larsen 1999), the inner nature (the character) and the outer nature (the natural environment) were equated and the features of landscape came to be seen not as the phenomena typical of any culture in given climatic conditions, but as national symbols, which find their natural expression in the language of the nation. It is very characteristic that while Estonian and Latvian national symbols are extremely similar, they are considered as purely Estonian or purely Latvian by those communities (according to Edmunds V. Bunkše, they are as follows: iconic images of separate family farmsteads with their clusters of architectonically distinct buildings and adjacent fields and forests, dispersed rural settlement patterns, large oak trees, meadows of uncultivated flowers, large erratic boulders etc. – Bunkše 1999).

Sure enough, memory is and has to be selective: in the course of what Eviatar Zerubavel has termed 'mnemonic socialisation' (Zerubavel 1999: 87), we are taught what is worth remembering and what is not. Similarly, when looking at a landscape, we use what Edward Relph has called 'selective vision' (Relph 1976: 123) or unconsciously obey what I have called 'landscape socialisation': we assess every element of the landscape as 'good' or 'bad', 'valuable' or 'corrupt' and register

¹ Consider, for example, the fact that every nation has a national bird and flower, or that while the Estonian and Finnish national anthems can share the same melody, they could never have the same lyrics.

only those parts of the landscape which culture has taught us to notice, ignoring others.

Yuri Lotman distinguishes two types of cultural change: gradual and explosive (Lotman 2001: 11–148). Gradual cultural change consists of slow and gradual movement of cultural forces from the centre to the periphery and *vice versa*, absorption of new elements across the border and leaving cultural debris behind, whereas cultural and mnemonic codes remain more or less stable (cf. Lotman 1990; Lotman, Uspenskji 2001). Irrelevant parts and texts in the cultural apparel are substituted swiftly, little by little for new ones. Therefore, in the case of gradual and constant cultural change, the landscape image changes relatively unnoticeably, gradually updating the public landscape image according to the mnemonic needs of people. When society has lost the need for a certain memory that is evoked by a certain element of the physical landscape, these elements cease to be ‘noticed’ and are nonexistent from the point of view of the reference system of the given culture. In effect, the landscape can ‘remember’ more than the culture does and the traits of past memories can remain ‘sleeping’ in the physical environment, waiting to be discovered by future generations whenever the need arises to acknowledge that part of the past. For example, many of the sacrificial stones and other monuments of the ancient Estonians remain unnoticed by the majority of present-day Estonians, but can be re-discovered, for example, in the framework of a nationalist movement that wishes to underline the historical continuity of Estonian people and their non-Indo-European origin.

Abrupt or explosive changes in culture open up unlimited possibilities for subsequent change and no path of development is more logical than another. Such a change initiates turbulent semiotic changes, since it requires the creation of new codes, new ideologies and new memory. The codes of memory change and, until the stabilisation processes that follow the explosion have taken place, there are several conflicting versions to choose from. Eviatar Zerubavel notes that ‘major changes in the way we view the past [---] correspond to the major social changes that affect entire mnemonic communities’ (Zerubavel 1999: 99) and we can add the words of John R. Gillis that ‘Temporal and topographical memory sites emerge at those times and in those places where there is a perceived or constructed break with the past. Modern memory was born not just from the sense of a break with the past, but from an intense awareness of the conflicting

representations of the past and the effort of each group to make its version the basis of national identity.' (Gillis 1996: 8.)

It is clear that collective memory is the key to power: he who commands what people remember and forget also commands what ideological constructions they buy. Thus 'the struggle of citizens against state power is the struggle of their memory against forced forgetting' (Connerton 1989: 15). The function of landscape as a vessel for memory becomes particularly interesting in this respect: while abrupt change in a political system can bring about as abrupt a change in landscape, it may also be that one of them changes more slowly, in which case there is a gap between the real and the 'identity' landscape. Or the changes in the physical environment can be brought about by an oppressive power, in which case an opposition to the real living environment surges. Any power, on the other hand, tries to use landscape image, which is one of the most stable reference systems for cultural identity, to create an illusion of historical continuity and stability even at times of turbulent change.

The following text will analyse these mechanisms in two very distant, both historically and geographically, examples: in the haiku literature of Estonia and in the concept of Eight Omi Landscapes in Tokugawa, Japan.

Haiku literature of Estonia: creeping resistance

The Estonian national symbols, born during the agricultural reform owing to which it became possible for Estonians to own land, are quite clearly focused on farming landscape, the mosaic meadows and fields of an individual farmstead. These symbols were further loaded with nationalistic overtones by the agricultural policy of the first Estonian Republic, which established the private farmstead as a basic unit of agriculture and agriculture as one of the main branches of the economy. Farms were given to the people who fought in the Liberation War and to outstanding sportsmen. The first Estonian Republic also redistributed the land of German nobility to Estonians and launched an extensive new settlement program to create farms in remote areas.

The Soviet occupation changed this landscape dramatically. Land and cattle were nationalised, and wealthy farmers were deported to Siberia. In 1948, collective farms started to be formed; instead of romantic mosaic fields there appeared vast mono-cultural fields of potatoes, turnips and even maize during Nikita Khrushchev times. The amelioration policy changed many regions beyond

recognition. At the same time an extensive urbanisation process started, resulting in 2/3 of Estonians moving to cities.

Of course, such a pronounced change in the socio-economic and political order brought about equally distinct changes in the rhetorical landscape image. In the official landscape rhetoric, a great deal of emphasis was placed on the vastness of the new fatherland, the borders of which stretched beyond the Baikal, on new agricultural technologies, people working in the fields for the benefit of the state and the 'workers' etc., whereas the rhetoric of the first Estonian Republic preferred to describe a rural idyll of farms, weaving it carefully with the romantic images of childhood and ancestral virtues, comparing it to a 'bird's nest'² and other symbols meant to evoke intimacy and tenderness.

Of course, many of the aforementioned changes in the socio-economic landscape would have occurred anyway because of the new situation in the world economy after the war, but in the context of political opposition to Soviet powers they started to be strongly associated with oppression. As is also indicated by recent research in oral history (Kõresaar 2002), the image of the private farmstead, on the other hand, came to signify independent Estonia; even more, the structure of an individual farm household became a symbol of the ideal structure of state, stability and safety. The countryside started to embody all the virtues of the Estonian nation.

Estonian haiku is a brief form of poetry, which was first written in the 1960s and 1970s and continued to be popular until the end of Soviet times. It is predominantly nature poetry, therefore evoking a landscape in one form or other. Born in the middle of the dissident movement, the discourse around haiku poetry is highly nationalistic. For example, consider the following quotes concerning the background of Estonian haiku literature by Mart Mäger, the compiler of an Estonian haiku anthology:

The connection of a farmer with nature is the primeval basis, from where the deep love of nature in Japanese poetry has developed. The beginning of farm work in spring was determined by the arrival of migrant birds. The blooming plants and other signs of weather predicted the future crops. – As with Estonian farmers, we might add here. (Mäger 1974.)

² With the words of a popular song: 'My father's little house/ Is like a bird's nest/ 'Cause like a little bird / I'm longing for it// A clear spring is flowing there / I drank from it when I was kid / In the green meadow grows a willow/ That's where I made my whistle.'

The compiler believes ... that Estonia is much more suitable a soil for haiku than Western Europe. Regardless of urbanisation and technical development, the connection between what originally was a nation of farmers with nature has not yet been broken. (Mäger 1980: 252.)

Such an ideological environment is also inevitably reflected in the haiku texts themselves. A look at the landscape that the haiku texts evoke shows us how a landscape image can act as a tool for mnemonic opposition.

The landscape that Estonian haiku evokes is clearly a village landscape. The difference between the landscape composition in haiku texts and in reality is shocking. Estonia has more than 3,700 km of coastline and 1,500 bigger or smaller islands.³ 38.7% of Estonian territory is covered by forests, 32.5% by agricultural land and 22.3% by wetlands. But a total of 82% of haiku depicts farming landscape, whereas sea and woods make up 3% each and bogs only 0.75% of the texts. That it is not just a matter of aesthetic preferences (which are also culturally conditioned) is clear if we compare the results with the composition of landscape in amateur landscape photos.⁴

	agricultural land	forest	wetlands	sea	city
haiku	82%	3%	0.75%	3%	1%
real landscape	32.5%	38.7%	22.3%		
nature photos	20%	17%	18.5%	19.5%	25%

Moreover, on closer inspection we find that the texts depict not the general farming landscape of the era, which could be found also in the official discourse, but the very centre of the private farmstead of the first Estonian Republic. Mostly those species of plants and animals are evoked that usually grow on a typical Estonian farm. Also many of the typical farm buildings are mentioned: log-houses, saunas, sheds, stalls etc. What are not mentioned, however, are the Soviet realia of

³ The number is remarkable only if you take into consideration the small size of the country.

⁴ The basis for the comparison is a database of about a thousand amateur nature photos published at www.pilt.ee (the server was closed as of this publication).

the day: vast fields of beetroot or turnip or maize, amelioration ditches, huge cow or pig sheds in the centre of collective farms, or even the new residential districts in towns. The image of the farm is deliberately archaic: ploughs, heaths, scythes, horse-sleighs and other agrarian tools described do not obviously belong to the life of Estonians in the second half of the 20th century, especially given that most of the authors lived in towns. The use of the old Estonian calendar, combining the colours of the Estonian flag in the depiction, and the use of the barn swallow and cornflower, the national bird and flower of Estonia, strengthen the nationalist overtones of the texts even more.

In short, we can say that by creating and nurturing an archaic image of a rural landscape long lost in reality and by ignoring those parts of reality that were considered to have been connected with the oppressing powers or that did not fit the Estonian national self-portrait, Estonian haiku functioned as a means of resistance and as a mnemonic tool to preserve some aspects of national history which could not be openly mentioned under the Soviet powers, but were nevertheless crucial for the national consciousness of the period. It was important for the independence-minded nation to remember the scenery which the official discourse handled negatively. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the need for such a mnemonic landscape disappeared and haiku has gradually started to do away with its anachronistic landscape image. In fact, after the sharp fall in the number of publications at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the haiku form has started to reappear in the repertoire of young writers again, this time in the service of a new cosmopolitan identity.⁵

Eight Omi Landscapes of Tokugawa Japan (1600–1867)

During the early Tokugawa period and, in fact, even some decades before that, there appeared a peculiar tradition in the Japanese arts, both in painting and in literature. This was the so-called Eight Landscapes tradition, the most famous of which is the Eight Omi Landscapes at the shores of Lake Biwa in Omi province (present-day Shiga Prefecture).

⁵ Recent years have seen a considerable change in the Estonian assessment of countryside, since new developments and economic resources are all in the cities. 'Pure nature' is still an important ideological concept in printed media but, at the same time, village life is more often than not equated with retardation, alcoholism and an inability to cope with life.

All of the Eight Landscapes are modelled on the famous Eight Xiao Xiang Landscapes at Dongtinghu Lake in the Hunan province of China, in the middle range of the Chang Jiang River, which in the poetry and painting of the Song dynasty (960–1279) was established as a canonical beauty spot. The canon of the Eight Xiao Xiang Landscapes consisted of eight landscape elements, which were generally not connected to any particular place at the lake but were rather supposed to render the celebrated beauty of the lake region in general.

The Japanese were familiar with the Eight Xiao Xiang Landscapes (*Shoushou hakkei*) in the Japanese canon from rather early times and already in the 14th century we can find examples of Japanese paintings on the topic, carefully preserving the ‘Chineseness’ of the atmosphere. It was also an important topic in the poetry of Zen monks, the so-called Literature of Five Mountains (*gozan bungaku*). In the 16th century, poets and the artists suddenly lost interest in Chinese landscapes and transported the whole canon to Japan. Unlike the Chinese, the Japanese were very particular in designating exact locations for each of the eight elements. So the ‘evening bell from a distant temple’ of Xiao Xiang became ‘evening bell at the Mii temple’, the ‘night rain over Xiao and Xiang rivers’ became ‘night rain at Karasaki’, ‘mountain village after storm’ became ‘clearing sky at the Awazu village’, ‘returning sails off the sea’ became ‘returning sails at Yabase’, ‘fishing village in sunset glow’ became ‘sunset glow at Seta River’, ‘autumn moon over Lake Dongtinghu’ became ‘autumn moon at Ishiyamadera’, ‘wild geese descending to sandbar’ became ‘descending geese at Katata’, ‘Jiang Tian Mountain in evening snow’ became ‘evening snow at Hira Mountain’. Projecting a canonical Chinese landscape image onto the real Japanese landscape, a double vision forms, a piece of scenery with two distinct historical pasts, in the consciousness of any Japanese of the time who was at least a bit educated.⁶

In my opinion, the reasons for such an import can be found in the historical situation of the era.

For more than a century, from 1467 to 1568, Japan was ravaged by endless wars between the feudal lords (*daimyo*), who were struggling for power. At the end of the period a tendency for unification began to emerge, which was carried out by three strong leaders: Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu. By 1600 Tokugawa Ieyasu managed to defeat both of his enemies and

⁶ On haiku poetry creating a double vision of history and the present, see Shirane 1998: 185–253.

established a new strong central regime. Ieyasu and his successors established central control over all regions of Japan, enforced a new class system, dividing people into four major classes: samurai, merchants, artisans and peasants, introduced a rather heavy tax system, and in short, made ample changes in the social, political and economic system of Japan. The scholars of Japanese Confucianism, such as Herman Ooms (Ooms 1985; see also Nosco 1984), emphasise that to legitimise their power and the changes, a complicated ideological discourse was created for the first time in Japanese history, skilfully blending the traditions of Japanese Shinto religion with Neo-Confucianist philosophy.

Confucianism was a wonderful tool for Tokugawa power, since – to put it very simplistically – one of its premises is that a human being must know his or her status in this society and live according to it. Then, and only then, will life follow the Way of the Heavens and prosperity and well-being descend on humans. Thus, sticking to the new class system contributes to peace and prosperity. And, unlike the class system, Confucianism was a venerable tradition which was very popular in Japan earlier. Using the mask of Chinese classics, the Tokugawa regime covered up the newness and arbitrariness of the new order.

I think that this could be considered an exemplary case of what Eric Hobsbawm (1992) has labelled ‘the invention of tradition’: a tradition which connects 17th century Japan to ancient China and the social order promoted by Confucian classics. We can obviously notice a process of formalisation and ritualisation of the ties between Chinese classical culture and Japanese culture in several walks of life, starting with the writing of new Confucian historiographies, the blending of Japanese and Chinese styles of writing and painting, and including the political system and landscape images such as Eight Omi Landscapes. It is true that Confucianism was popular before the Tokugawa period as well, but never before was it systematically blended with something truly Japanese. The Eight Omi Landscapes are set at the biggest lake in Japan, which is located very close to the ancient capital Kyoto and acted as an important hub of transport, and thus its blending with the Chinese tradition had a large symbolic significance. But the Eight Omi Landscapes were not the only instance: already at the beginning of the Tokugawa period there were 37 different sets of Eight Landscapes noted. Most of them were located in Kyoto, but Eight Landscapes were transferred also to Nikko, the burial place of Tokugawa Ieyasu, and Mount Fuji, the holiest of the holies (Horikawa 2002: 71–131). And that was not all: landscape

description, especially in haiku literature – the new literature of the era – was also drawing heavily on Chinese traditions, blending even the most famous Japanese natural sights, such as Matsushima, into the Chinese world.⁷ Sure enough, allusions to Chinese literature had a long tradition also prior to the import of the Eight Landscape canon in Japan, but the latter gives this tradition a wholly new geographical dimension, whereas classical Japanese literature prefers to describe geographical realities more like ‘ideal landscapes’ than actually existing spaces.

Creating a Chinese history for a Japanese landscape and other truly Japanese things gave the Tokugawa government the historical background they needed to justify the sudden introduction of the Confucian moral code. But, in addition, creating a symbolic environment fostered a sense of stability. Thus creating a ‘forgotten’ link between Japanese and classical Chinese traditions gave the Tokugawa authorities – but also the people – the illusion of continuity and stability that they badly needed after long wars. Updating their mental image of landscapes so that it included the long Chinese history pushed the recent war history into oblivion, providing the culture with a beautiful Sino-Japanese landscape that followed the Way of the Heavens. The Eight Omi Landscapes constitutes but one example of this wider process, but it nevertheless illustrates how profound changes in culture and collective memory do not leave the image of landscape intact.

Conclusion

The two examples given above are only two from a much longer possible list of examples of what I believe is a general cultural mechanism. A landscape image is not a mere space for subsistence activities, the conceptualisation, mapping and ritualisation of which is necessary for successful operation in a space. It is a tool of the auto-communicative construction of identity and memory. As demonstrated above, an image of landscape can function as a key to the mnemonic resources of a given culture and, during periods of abrupt cultural and socio-economic change, this mnemonic image can show considerable discrepancy *vis-à-vis* reality. Obviously, cultural turmoil requires a redefinition of many different concepts in a culture, but as shown above, the control and manipulation or protection of a mental image of a landscape can act as one of the major issues in the mnemonic

⁷ E.g. Matsushima and Kisagata scenes in Matsuo Bashō’s ‘Narrow Road to the Deep North’. For English see e.g. Bashō 1996: 79–80, 120–125.

battle between rival interpretations of past and present in the most diverse cultures and periods, such as 20th century Estonia and 17th century Japan.

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