

Regional Characteristics of “Bonkei” from the Perspective of International Comparison and Historical Verification

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1. Introduction

“Bonkei” is a ceramic/wooden tray/bowl filled with soil or water and decorated with rooted plants, rocks, miniature figures, animals, and houses to create a small landscape. Originating in China, it has spread throughout East and Southeast Asia. In the present Vietnam “Hòn Non Bộ” has been developed, in which a rocky mountain is built in a water basin or pond, and plants and trees are planted to represent a landscape of mountains and islands rising above the water’s edge. In Japan today, “Bonsai” is in the mainstream, but prior to the Taisho era, “Bonkei,” “Bonsan,” “Bontei,” “Bonseki,” “Bonga,” and other techniques to compose scenery on a tray vessel were also developed.

Upon entering this school, I came to live in Gifu Prefecture for the first time and learned about deep landscapes with a combination of rocks, water, and plants, such as Hatobukiyama and Onigashima in Kani City, Oniwa Park in the Chuno and Tono regions, as well as Ena Gorge and Hisui Gorge. As a result of thinking about how to preserve and reproduce the sensation of viewing these landscapes, I came up with the idea of creating a “Bonkei” of the actual landscape. I decided to create a “Bonkei” that has features not found in normal gardens because it is portable, can be enjoyed indoors, can be produced with few materials and expense costs, and can condense and emphasize the characteristics of the actual landscape.

2. Purpose of Study

To actually produce “Bonkei,” it is necessary to learn about the techniques and methods of expression. Since “Bonkei” production is not active in Japan today, it was necessary to investigate the “Bonkei” situation abroad and the history of “Bonkei” inside and outside of Japan. I also thought it would be possible to clarify the regional characteristics of each “Bonkei” by comparing the “Bonkei” of each culture.

The purpose of this study is to learn about “Bonkei” techniques and methods of expression through international comparison and historical verification of “Bonkei,” and to create a “Bonkei” of the actual landscape that exists in the region.

3. Method of Study

First, investigate the history of “Bonkei” in China, Vietnam, and Japan to confirm how “Bonkei” has been formed in modern and contemporary times. Then, compare the “Bonkei” of each culture by form and use, and examine the regional characteristics of “Bonkei” of each culture from an international perspective. Next, examine Japanese “Bonkei” from the late Edo period to the Taisho period, which represent actual places of interest and landscapes, using the literatures from the periods as a reference, and consider the regional expression of “Bonkei” in Japan. Based on this research, create a “Bonkei” of the landscape of the Tono and Chuno regions of Gifu Prefecture, using Mino ware, a specialty of the region, as the vessel.

4. Results and Observation

Through this research, I was able to take a step toward understanding the characteristics of each “Bonkei” culture by giving an overview of the history of “Bonkei” in China, Vietnam, and Japan. In China, the expression of mountains with prominent peaks and trees using strong ancient colors is preferred, and the sentiment of poetry and painting is valued in both the creation and appreciation of “Bonkei”; in Vietnam, waterfront scenery is skillfully expressed using water basins and ponds, and there is flexibility in the heavy use of miniatures and the selection of modern materials and techniques; and in Japan, the creation of gentle landscapes with an awareness of horizontal direction and depth rather than vertical direction can be considered a characteristic of “Bonkei.” Regarding the uses of “Bonkei,” it was concluded that in China, “Bonkei” was used to “escape from death and the mundane world” in relation to the Senzan philosophy and literati philosophy; in Vietnam, “Bonkei” was used to “celebrate and wish for happiness in this life” because it was made to commemorate the birthdays of emperors and used for divination; in Japan, it was highly valued as imported goods from China, and the association with the culture of the common people and the taste of the literati during the Edo period led to the conclusion that it had a strong character as a “property good” and “toy”. Compared to China and Vietnam, Japanese “Bonkei” has less religious

and ideological factors. In other words, the lack of religious and ideological constraints makes it easier for even people today to create and appreciate “Bonkei,” and allows experimentation with different subjects and techniques of expression.

Further investigation through the literature into the history of Bonkei in Japan revealed that the “Bonkei” reproducing famous places was popular in Japan from the late Edo period to the Taisho period (Figure 1), and that “Bonkei” production techniques and methods of expression were actively pursued. In the Meiji and Taisho periods, in particular, there were attempts to modernize “Bonkei” through the use of new materials and the application of landscape theory and Western and Eastern art theory. These techniques and methods of expression, which fell into disuse during and after World War II, are worthy of reconsideration.

Based on international comparison and historical verification, I created a “Bonkei” representing the landscape of Hatobuki Mountain in Kani City and the lower reaches of the Kani River, and a “Bonkei” representing the landscape of Oniwa Park in Mitake Town and Mizunami City (Photo-1) and named each work “Hatobuki Chinsui” and “Oniwa Seido” based on the eight-view style landscape view originated in China. After creating the “Bonkei”, when looking at actual landscapes (not only the landscapes which “Bonkei” were created for), the sense of tracing the contours of the landscape (mountain ridges, valleys, and lines of roads and rivers) with my hands began to appear frequently, and not only did my attachment and familiarity with the landscape become stronger, but I also began to think about how to incorporate the landscape into “Bonkei” and landscaping spaces more frequently. On the other hand, when looking at the produced “Bonkei,” I was reminded in detail of my actual visit to the landscape, indicating that “Bonkei” serves as a kind of recording device.

Going forward, I would like to try to reproduce famous “Bonkei” works from the late Edo to Taisho periods, as well as conduct further research on “Bonkei” from overseas to discover new “landscapes. In addition, after graduating from this school, I plan to work in Hokkaido, where I am originally from. My current goal is to create new “Bonkei” that are suited to the topography, geology, and vegetation, etc. of Hokkaido, referring to the crafts of the Ainu people and the way they use plants. Furthermore, although I was able to create “Bonkei” that appealed mainly to the senses of sight and touch at this time, I would like to create “Bonkei” that appeal to the senses of smell and taste, as well as “Bonkei” that can be enjoyed only by the sense of touch, thereby playing a role in the creation of a “Bonkei” culture that can be enjoyed by a wider variety of people.



Photo-1 "Oniwa Seido"
Diameter of vessel: approx. 25 cm

Figure-1: From "Tokaido fifty-three station Hachiyamazue"
Okazaki Yahagibashi Bridge" (1848)