Ryōanji: Karesansui, Sakura, and Beyond

Background

Ryōanji, the dragon peace temple, is considered one of the signature constructions of zen Buddhism in Japan. It is especially famous for its karesansui (dry landscape), which is a series of rocks craftily designed to mimic waters and mountains in nature. Whenever people talk about karesansui, people talk about zen and Ryōanji. But what if I told you this is nothing more than a stereotype, and that Ryōanji only became popular after WWII?

Who Designed Ryōanji?

In fact, we don't know for sure who built Ryōanji. The official website lists Hosokawa Katsumoto as the creator, but there are a bunch of other possible names as well: Sōami, the painter; Kanamori Sōwa, the tea master; Giten, the first chief priest at Ryōanji; Shiken Saidō, the chief priest of another temple named Saihōji…In fact, Ryōanji wasn't all that popular in the past, which is why we don't even have a record of its origin.

What Is Ryōanji For?

Although we don't know who created Ryōanji, we do know it has always been a zen temple under the Rinzai sect. Zen, known as Chan in China, is "fundamentally Buddhist, thoroughly Chinese". The Japanese zen is basically an extension of Chinese Chan, and the two share many similarities. Unlike other schools that focus on sutras and chanting, zen is hard-core wisdom-oriented.
Ryōanji belongs to the Rinzai school of zen, which is slightly different from the Sōtō school started by Dōgen that we learned from class. They both focus on Kenshō, which means seeing one's buddha nature, and integrating practices into everyday life, but Rinzai focus more on kōans. Ryōanji was built not only as a temple, but also a place to help people meditate and gain Kenshō.

When Did Ryōanji Become Popular?

In *Shots in the Dark*, the author suspects that Ryōanji only became known for zen and its karesansui after WWII. Before that, Ryōanji was just any random Rinzai temple, and was never particularly popular. However, after WWII, people, especially those from the west, became interested to know more about zen, and that is when Ryōanji became well known for its karesansui, and all kinds of efforts were made to decipher what the temple was trying To convey through the mysterious karesansui.

Fig 1: Myōan Eisai
Found of Rinzai Zen

Karesansui as Kōan

Gong An, a common practice that a Chan Buddhist master uses to test out his disciple's understanding, becomes kōan in Japan. Kōans are usually raised in simple questions or performances, and are generally extremely hard to respond to unless the disciple truly understands Buddha nature.

The karesansui in Ryōanji can also be interpreted as a kōan given by its designer. Different people have different interpretations of the arrangement of the stones. Some see it as "tiger cubs crossing the river", while some others see it as the Chinese character for heart. What do you see? *Show me your understanding!*

The Two Truths

First and foremost, karesansui demonstrates the idea of the two truths, that the absolute truth is beyond the provisional truth, and that buddha nature can only be performed instead of told. It's hard to describe the zen "inside" the karesansui with languages, but once you see it and feel it, you know it's right there.

Skillful Means

Karesansui can also be interpreted as a skillful means to teach buddha nature. Skillful means refers to reaching people where they are. Zen adopted this terminology, but altered it so that the teachings are performances rather than languages. The designer uses this garden as a skillful means to remind people awakening is right here in front of you, and right there inside of you.

Being-time

Karesansui demonstrates the interdependence of time. One essential component of karesansui is the sand that resembles flowing water and time. This resonates with the idea of being-time, that every second is interdependent on each other, just like every drop of water cannot be separated from each other.

Subitism

Many people believe that Sōami is the person behind the scene. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Sōami's paintings were in China's southern school style. Interestingly, the southern school and northern school in painting correspond to those of Chan as well. Painters from the southern school tend to believe in sudden awakening, and integrate this idea into their works. From this point of view, karesansui stresses subitism: again, once you understand it, you understand it. If you don't, you just don't.

Sakura: Impermanence and Purity

Another signature sight of Ryōanji is the sakura tree (cherry blossom tree) that blooms every spring and shades the temple in pink. The Japanese absolutely love these sakura blossoms.

A lovely spring night
suddenly vanished while we
viewed cherry blossoms

This is a Haiku by Matsuo Bashō, from which you can probably gain some insights into why the Japanese love sakura so much. They love it not only because of its beauty, but also because of how it reminds them of the impermanence of life and purity.

Fig 2: Sakura Blossom

Impermanence (Mujō)

Nothing is permanent, whether mental or physical, eventually everything will vanish. The idea of impermanence lies at the heart of Indian Buddhism and is one of the things that sets apart the Buddhists and the sramanas. While the latter believe in eternal atman, the former denies it with the doctrine of no-self. In Japanese, the term for impermanence is mujō. Sakura only blooms for around a week each year and fades away quickly. The beautiful blossoms remind the Japanese of the mujō of their lives.

Purity

Before Buddhism gained access to Japan, the Japanese (or rather, people living on the peninsula) had their own religious system where they believed in Kamis. Kamis can be anything that is awesome, which is why the Japanese consider the sakura tree at Ryōanji a kami. There is one thing in common for these Kamis though, that they like things that are pure and hate those that are not. Sakura blossoms come in light colors like pink and white, which are considered clean and pure. Thus, to many Japanese, sakura blossoms symbolize purity, and is thus admired by many.

Ryōanji as a Zen Temple

Ryōanji is so much more than karesansui and the sakura tree! Let us for one second forget about those two, although they are for sure fascinating, and think about Ryōanji solely as a zen temple. Just like most zen temples, Ryōanji follows a Zenshūyō style architecture, which was imported from China. In Zenshūyō, there are usually seven halls, called Shichidō Garan, but what counts towards the seven halls varies from temple to temple. For Ryōanji, some of the components are introduced below.

Sanmon (the gate)

The higher the rank of a zen temple, the more gates it has. A temple of the highest rank has three gates, kūmon, musōmon and muganmon, which stand for emptiness, formlessness and inaction respectively. Ryōanji is apparently not one of these high-end temples as it only has one gate as its sanmon.

Butsuden (the main hall)

Butsuden means the hall of the Buddha. It is usually the most important component of a zen temple. Inside the butsuden of Ryōanji, there are some very pretty fusuma (panels) with paintings that feature Chinese immortals, four seasons, etc. And yes, some of these paintings are covered in gold.

Fig 3: Sanmon of Ryōanji

Fig 4: Butsuden of Ryōanji

Fig 5: Hattō of Ryōanji

Fig 6: Fusuma of Butsuden

Apart from those introduced above, there are also a hattō (the lecture hall), a sōdō (the meditation hall), a kuri (kitchen), a tōsu (toilet), and a yokushitsu (bath) in the temple.

Figures
Fig 1: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eisai
Fig 2: https://www.ivs.co.jp/english/news/
Fig 3: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hōjō_(Ryōan-ji)
Fig 4: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/immortals_and_sages_paintings_from_ryoanji_temple_the_metropolitan_museum_of_art_bulletin_v_51_no_1_summer_1993
Fig 5: https://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g298564-d2780358-i116677405-Tsuruya_at_Ryoanji_Hattou-Kyoto_Prefecture_Kinkichiho.html
Background: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ryoan-ji_Dry_Garden.jpg

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