

An Analysis of the Cultural Differences between China and Japan, Using the Example of Gleaning Shellfish at the Falling Tide and Busy with Crops

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Abstract: The two works, 'Gathering Shells at Falling Tide' and 'Busy with Crops', represent two different cultures and the context of their times. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, traditional Chinese woodblock painting techniques reached their peak, and the carving techniques also influenced Japan, a country separated from China by sea, with a profound impact on the development and evolution of Japanese ukiyo-e. Analyzing their works to find the similarities and differences between the two cultures in the same historical period is conducive to a better understanding and development of their respective cultures.

Keywords: Ukiyo-e, Woodblock prints, Cultural similarities and differences

1. Introduction

Cultures never exist independently, and there are always uncanny similarities and differences between cultures, and there seems to be a special connection between the art forms derived from different cultural contexts. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, traditional Chinese woodblock painting techniques reached their peak, and the carving techniques also influenced Japan, a country separated from China by sea, with a profound impact on the development and evolution of Japanese ukiyo-e [1]. Japanese ukiyo-e was a popular art form in the Edo period. To a large extent, it was also a symbol of Japanese culture. With the further development of Sino-Japanese relations, the cultural exchange between China and Japan has entered a new phase, and the cultural contrast between China and Japan has become a hot topic today.

This study draws a close look at the two works and compares them with contextual analysis and Ukiyo-e and Qing dynasty woodblock prints. It analyzes their works to find the similarities and differences between the two cultures in the same historical period is conducive to a better understanding and development of their respective cultures.

2. Context of Gathering Shells on the Falling Tide

The painting, also known as The Tide Gathers Shells, is a representative work by Katsushika Hokusai, and depicts the annual sea-gathering activity that takes place on the shore between spring and early summer in Japan, especially on the third day of March, when the tide is low. In the near distance are

three children busy digging in the sand and three noblewomen holding bamboo baskets containing shells, the woman on the far right, dressed in brown with shaved eyebrows, is the oldest, and the woman in a brown kimono with cherry blossom motifs and small sleeves is middle-aged, and the woman on the left, wearing black sleeves, is the youngest. In the distance, where the sea meets the sky, the top of Mount Fuji, still covered in unmelted snow, looks out over the busy people on the beach. The "tortoise with hair and feet of a snake" seal in the lower right-hand corner of the painting refers to an imaginary object, the tortoise being hairless and the snake having no feet, meaning fiction. "The seal was mostly used around the age of forty-five by Katsushika Hokusai, and the paintings with this seal were all completed in the artist's prime, making them among the finest of his works.



Figure1: Woodblock print, "Busy with Crops", Yangliuqing, Tianjin, 58 cm x 102 cm
Collection of the National Art Museum of China

Ukiyo-e was a popular genre of Japanese prints from the 17th to the 19th centuries, vividly recording the daily lives and pleasures of ordinary people, reflecting the aesthetic sense of the emerging citizenry, and having universal humanistic values and the spirit of the times [2]. During the two centuries of development of ukiyo-e, a large number of outstanding artists emerged, including Suzuki Harunobu, Torii Kiyonaga, Kitagawa Kemaro, Tosu Saigaku, Katsushika Hokusai, and Kagawa Hiroshige, who is known as the Six Great Ukiyo-e Artists. They were highly regarded and influential for their skill, distinctive style, and profound attainments, either because they pioneered new techniques in ukiyo-e, opened up new styles of subject matter, or revealed the cultural psychology and national identity of the Japanese people. "Ukiyo-e" means "painting of the floating world", which means that life is like a passing cloud and that it is time to enter the world and have fun. Ukiyo-e is a type of Japanese printmaking, which is done by a trio of original artists, engravers, and painters. After the original artist has completed the original drawing, the engraver carves out the figure on a wooden plate, and then the brayer colors the plate and transfers the design to paper. As many colors are needed as there are plates to be carved, the more colors there are, the more complicated the process. Although the work was done in collaboration, at first only the original painter could put his signature on the work, but later the engraver also put his signature on the work. In addition, due to the Shogunate's censorship system, the Ukiyo-e that is allowed to be published bears the Shogunate's censorship mark and the seal of the publisher. The main steps were: drawing

the original picture, engraving the inked plate, selecting the colors, engraving the color plate, and printing [3]. "The Ukiyo-e were mainly paintings depicting the customs of Japan from the Edo period to the Taisho period. They saw the world as a "sad world" full of unpleasant things, so they painted ukiyo-e with the word "ukiyoe" because they wanted to live happily and enjoy the world [4].



Figure2: Woodblock print, "Busy with Crops", Yangliuqing, Tianjin, 58 cm x 102 cm
Collection of the National Art Museum of China

Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), formerly known as Nakajima Teizo, studied under Katsushikawa Haruaki in his early years and was known as Katsushikawa Harurang, but later changed his name to several other names. Hokusai fused Japanese, Chinese and Western painting techniques in his work, and his works took a wide variety of forms, including madrigal illustrated books, novel illustrations, model paintings, folkloric paintings, and ukiyo-e, among which the most accomplished and influential were the ukiyo-e landscapes. His landscapes show a high degree of refinement and generalization of form and color and have a distinctly decorative character. His image of Mount Fuji has become one of the most iconic images in Ukiyo-e [5].

3. The Time of Busy Crop

Busy with the Crop is a work on the theme of harvest created by Yangliuqing painter Gao Tongxuan. The style of Gao Tongxuan's harvest paintings differs considerably from that of other New Year paintings, and the two that have survived are 'Celebrating the Year of Plenty' and 'Busy with Crops'. At the near left end of the scene are stacks of wheat taller than two people, with a wooden ladder set up beside them. Below the stacks are several peasants handing bundles of straw in turn to the peasants at the top who are placing the bundles with wooden forks. Behind them, there is an old man with a bushel fan, who seems to be directing them on how to build up the bales.

To the right of the stacks several young men are hoeing wheat straw, and one of the young women is looking back to watch the straw being built. Next to them is an old man with a rattle in his hand, behind which a young child is wrapped around his neck, the old man apparently looking after three young children. One of the young children is grasping the grain in a colander with his bare hands. Teapots and tea bowls are prepared on the ground for people to use during farm breaks. Behind the

old man is a donkey pulling a stone threshing floor, and a young man wearing a straw hat is leaning on the back of the donkey watching the men hoeing the haystacks.

The entire painting is a detailed depiction of the movements and expressions of the characters and the process of farming in the wheat field, with the common farming implements such as dustpans, shovels, pitchforks, baskets, stone mills, and threshing floors portrayed in detail, making it highly interesting to watch and enjoy. It fully embodies the theme of 'busy crops'. The composition is also very full, with an orderly arrangement of the front and back, a strong sense of hierarchy, and a sense of perspective, with the whole picture, fully reflecting the busy scene at the time of the summer wheat harvest.

As the most widespread artistic vehicle in China's agrarian society, woodblock prints carried people's visions of an ideal life and gave them artistic enjoyment, spiritual comfort, and useful education [6]. Woodblock prints were created on subjects that were popular with the people and covered all aspects of folk life, making them an 'encyclopedia' of ancient secular life. China is a vast country, and woodblock prints are produced from all over the north and south, and over the course of more than a thousand years of development, more than ten typical styles have been formed, featuring the region. Among them, the "South Peach (Taohuawu) and North Willow (Yangliuqing)" are the most famous, while others include Wuqiang in Hebei, Weifang in Shandong, Fengxiang in Shaanxi, Zhuxianzhen in Henan, Mianzhu in Sichuan, Zhangzhou in Fujian, and Foshan in Guangdong, which vary in shape, color, technique and aesthetics. Yangliuqing New Year paintings are made by 'half-printing and half-painting', which means that the lines are first carved out of a wooden board, printed on paper with ink, and then filled in with colored pens after two or three monochrome sets. The process of production is rough as follows: creating the manuscript, dividing the plate, carving the plate, overprinting, painting, and framing [7]. The production has both the flavor of the plates and the wood, as well as the artistry of the colorful hand-painting, so we feel that folk art has more flavor.

4. Similarities and Differences Between The Two Cultures

First of all, both Ukiyo-e and Qing dynasty woodblock prints benefited from the prosperity of book prints and the maturity of engraving and printing technology during the Ming dynasty. The Ming dynasty was a time when popular folk books such as novels, legends, and operas flourished, and almost all the plays and popular novels published were illustrated, making it a golden age for the art of book engraving [8]. In the Ming dynasty, the engraving and printing of books were largely centered on the northern and southern capitals. After the destruction of the Yuan by the Ming emperor, the capital was built in Jinling and then moved to Beijing during the Yongle period. Since the two capitals were equipped with state prisons, the cultural activities of engraving and printing gradually took shape, with Nanjing, Suzhou, and Huizhou (now She County) in Anhui and Jian'an (now Jian'ou) in Fujian in the south, and Beijing in the north, and then gradually developed to Dongchang (Liaocheng) in Shandong. "It is thus assumed that the flourishing of woodcut prints in Jinling, Suzhou, Jian'an, and Huizhou was a positive factor in the development of the art of New Year painting in Suzhou Taoyuanwu, Fujian Zhangzhou, Anhui Shexian and Tianjin Yangliuqing." In the early 17th century, Ming engravings with illustrations were imported to Japan through Nagasaki, the only port of foreign trade in the Edo period, and became the main reason that inspired the development of woodblock illustration in Japan [9]. In the late 17th century, the Japanese painter Hishikawa Shixuan was influenced by the prints of the Ming and Qing dynasties and created a technique that combined printmaking and painting, which in turn allowed the images to be separated from the form of the booklet and transformed them into a separate aesthetic. In the late 17th century, the Japanese artist Hishikawa Shixuan was influenced by the prints of the Ming and Qing dynasties and created a technique that combined printmaking and painting, which in turn allowed the images to be separated

from the form of the booklet and turned into individual prints (one fold) with a separate aesthetic, thus forming the typical style of ukiyo-e [10].

Secondly, during the Kang and Qian Dynasties of the Qing Dynasty, Suzhou prints ('Gusu version' of New Year's paintings), which were mainly based on prosperous city scenes and female figures, were exported to Japan through the sea trade and became a model for Japanese painters to learn printmaking techniques and the use of chiaroscuro and other. It became a model for Japanese artists to learn the techniques of printmaking and the use of Western techniques and had an important influence on the expression and use of techniques in ukiyo-e. The Ming dynasty prints were widely used in the "set out" and "arch flower" and other printing techniques were absorbed and borrowed from the Ukiyo-e [11]. This is the direct influence of Gusu prints on the Ukiyo-e.

Further, they were representative of the art of oriental woodcut printmaking, and both Qing dynasty woodblock prints and ukiyo-e had some influence on Western art. From the end of the Kangxi period to the middle of the Qianlong period, Gusu prints, in addition to flowing into Japan in large numbers through the port of Nagasaki, also entered the European market through the trading ships of the East India Company and were appreciated by Europeans, especially the royal family and the nobility. These Chinese prints were glued on and used as wallpaper to decorate rooms, and many European royal castles and estates still have them intact today. Together with Chinese objects such as porcelain, silk, lacquer, and gardens, Gusu prints became a component of the 'Chinoiserie' that emerged in Europe in the 18th century, influencing European art and aesthetics and contributing to the shift from Baroque to Rococo style. Ukiyo-e prints, on the other hand, flowed into France in the second half of the 19th century, inspiring Impressionist painters, contributing to the development of the Impressionist style, and directly influencing the style of painting and the style of the later Impressionists. It can be argued that the oriental aesthetic interests presented by Qing dynasty woodblock prints and ukiyo-e prints influenced the Western art world in different ways and through different channels [12]. However, the two art forms, Qing dynasty woodblock prints, and ukiyo-e prints have their characteristics, which are reflected in the differences in the portrayal of the figure, the expression of the aesthetic style, and the evolution of the technical methods. The Yamato people of Japan were people who believed in nature as a god, and those who obeyed it prospered, and those who disobeyed it perished. Many legends were also related to nature and animals, so most of their paintings were related to nature, such as Katsushika Hokusai's *Surfing in Kanagawa* [13]; whereas China was willing to believe in divine power, such as the traditional ruling mindset - the divine right of kings, etc. Confucius held a respectful attitude toward ghosts and gods, so the paintings were also more inclined toward figure painting and the painter's inner feelings of the artist [14]. In particular, the idea of 'timely enjoyment', which is expressed in the Ukiyo-e paintings through their focus on the present world, and the 'unrealistic' idealism of the Qing dynasty woodblock prints, which are based on a vision of the future, represent two distinctly different national characters and spiritual needs [15].

5. Conclusions

It is an interesting process to compare and reflect on two artistic images that have similar forms and attributes. The term "Ukiyo-e" implies the idea of entering the world and having fun, and that life is like a passing cloud, and as Japanese civic art, "its birth and popularity put an end to the dominance of religious art, and secular art became the mainstream of society. Art shifted from the representation of gods and Buddhas to the depiction of human beings themselves. At the same time, it broke the stereotype that art was the monopoly of the powerful and the ruling class, and went to the masses". As a market-oriented art commodity, the 'non-artistic' nature of ukiyo-e prints is consistent with that of the Qing dynasty woodblock prints, both of which were intended for the general public and working people and had to cater to the needs of the masses in terms of form and content. However, in ukiyo-e 'the subtlety of the Japanese cultural character, or the psychological habit of avoiding

glimpses, is still evident. As with the influence of Zen Buddhism, there is always some space or unfinished business left for the audience to participate in the creation of the work while viewing it, thus completing the true meaning of the work'. In this respect, the woodblock prints of the Qing dynasty differ significantly. The content of traditional New Year paintings is broadly divided into the categories of door gods and door paintings, opera or stories, worldly customs, auspiciousness, and festivity, as well as some current news and humor, and satire, which reflect realistic themes. Even in the opera and story categories, the majority of the images are depictions of the ideal world of the people. Even in the opera and story categories, they reflect the heroic sentiments of loyalty and chivalry, the cynicism of evil, and the idealism of rewarding good with evil and persuading people to do good. The Yangliuqing New Year painting 'Busy with Crops' from the Daoguang period of the Qing dynasty vividly depicts people working in the field, rolling wheat, loading bags, and transporting barns, with men, women, and children all dressed neatly and beautifully, and women in brocade dresses. The busy field of labor is never as poetic as in the painting, nor would the farmhouse be such a large courtyard, which is an idealized expression. The poem inscribed on the upper bar of the painting, 'Only the farmers have difficulty in harvesting, they are busy in the field all the time, and when the barley and wheat are harvested, the women sing songs of a great year', speaks of the hardships of the past and the joy of a good harvest. However, in the construction of the picture, people prefer to show the joy of the harvest, while deliberately minimizing the hardship of working, to achieve self-congratulation. The main use of New Year paintings was to decorate windows and doors or to decorate walls for the festive season, as the saying goes, 'to make children happy, to bring glory to the house'. In agrarian societies, the most important traditional festival of the year is finally celebrated by ordinary people who have worked hard all year, and it is also one of the few times of the year when people can rest and have fun, hoping to say goodbye to the old and welcome the new on such a day, leaving behind the tiredness and bad luck of the past and ushering in a new year of good luck and good fortune. If there is one thing that can hold people's hopes for the future and happiness on such a day, it is undoubtedly the New Year paintings that are pasted on the walls after sweeping the house. Thus, with a strong sense of utilitarianism, people spared no effort in expressing their wishes and dreams on the material carrier of the New Year paintings, and year after year, people constructed (or even fictionalized) an ideal country in line with traditional values on the images of the New Year paintings, thus satisfying their inner desires and needs. In the author's view, this utilitarian-driven quality of Qing dynasty woodblock prints, and the consequent idealization of the images, is the greatest difference between them and the Ukiyo-e prints in terms of artistic temperament and cultural psychology.

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