

How Does the Rain Get into the Picture? Johannes Wieninger

Images of the weather – or, rather, of atmospheric phenomena – have been a central theme of East Asian poetry since the Song period (960–1279). Mist, night, moonlight and the melancholy gaze into the distance serve as vehicles of mood in poems that fuse the seasons and specific sites into iconographies of the atmospheric. Of particular importance in this context was the literary structure of the *Eight Views*. This thematic structure, recurring essentially unchanged to this day, has provided direction and guidance to generations of artists.¹ The earliest extant compilation of the titles of the *Eight Views of Xiao-Xiang* dates to around 1090 and was published by Shen Gua (1031–1059) in regulated verse:

Geese Descending to Level Sand
Sail Returning from Distant Shore

Mountain Market, Clearing Mist
River and Sky, Evening Snow

Autumn Moon over Dongting
Night Rain on the Xiao-Xiang

Evening Bell from Mist-Shrouded Temple
Fishing Village in Evening Glow

All subsequent variations of the *Eight Views* have followed these themes.² One of the views is devoted to the *Night Rain*, an expression of utter melancholy, as rain is equated with tears. Yearning for one's beloved, yearning for one's far-away home and to return from exile – each of these woes is so intimately associated with the subject of rain that they appear to have obviated all need for an actual depiction of the falling rain. All that is shown is the mood of rain and the moment after.

One of the most remarkable landscape paintings from fifteenth-century China, an exceptionally long, elegant scroll painting executed in ink, is preserved at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin. The title alone is promising: *Spring Rain on the Xiang River* (ill. 1). At the end of the scroll the artist Xia Chang (1388–1470) added a comment:

You, Zhongzhou, said to me: [...] 'May I now have a bamboo picture?' Then you produced a roll of paper and asked me to paint 'Spring Rain on the Xiang River'. Before I knew it, another two years had gone by. This summer I had relatively little to do at the office. I did not leave the house because of the incessant rain. So I painted

1 Cf. Alfreda Murck, *Poetry and Painting in Song China. The Subtle Art of Dissent*, Cambridge and London 2002.

2 Ibid., p. 71.

*this picture for you. But I don't know if it meets your taste. I would be happy if you did not scrutinise my clumsy work too closely.*³

More than 14 metres long, this handscroll is usually admired for its beautiful depiction of bamboo. What interests us, however, is the rendering of the title *Spring Rain*. The painting is executed in broad loose strokes with a very wet brush. One can almost feel the sodden meadows and mosses. The streams are swollen and form frothy waterfalls; the clumps of bamboo, bent under the wind and weighed down with moisture, struggle to spring back up. All this is felt and depicted with exquisite sensitivity. But it is not raining! The painting captures the moment after a long and heavy downpour, but not the rain itself. The image also follows the tradition of the subjects *Along the Riverbank* and *Waterfall*⁴ and underpins these with the closely observed look and feel of nature *after* a rainstorm, presented in a manner that is clearly legible. Working some three hundred years after the motif *Night Rain on the Xiao-Xiang* was first formulated, Xia Chang fused several themes, each of them characterised by a heightened observation of nature, into a new one. At the same time, his painting is also related to another group of subjects, namely that of the *Four Seasons* or *Twelve Months* paintings. And, as in the *Eight Views*, there is a close link between literature and landscape painting. Once again real places are invested with the metaphorical capability to express human moods.⁵ Series of paintings such as these can often be found on folding screens – twelve-panel screens (primarily in China) or pairs of six-panel screens (primarily in Japan).⁶

If Chinese artists did not actually depict rain as such – and, in fact, not a single exception is known – then how did it get into Japanese paintings? Some insight is offered by a pre-1550 painting by Kanō Motonobu (1476–1559) which draws on the *Eight Views*. In his *Eight Views of Xiao-Xiang in One Painting*, Motonobu united the eight subjects in a single landscape, creating *one* painting that brought together recognisable allusions to each of the eight traditional atmospheric scenes. *Night Rain on the Xiao-Xiang*, for example, takes the shape of a passage of diagonal hatching in the top right corner of the composition above the mist-shrouded landscape (ill. 2). This ingenious synthesis of a traditionally multipart Chinese genre not only gave rise to a new format of landscape painting, but also to new visual elements to convey mood.

In the seventeenth century book publishing emerged as a commercial enterprise in Japan. Expanding rapidly, it was characterised by woodblock printing and the fusion of text and

3 Wang Ching-Ling, 'Ein elegantes Geschenk. Die Querrolle *Frühlingsregen am Xiang-Fluss* von Xia Chang im Museum für Asiatische Kunst Berlin', *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift*, new series 12 (2012), no. 24, pp. 11–26, here p. 24.

4 Maxwell K. Hearn, Wen C. Fong, *Along the Riverbank. Chinese Paintings from the C. C. Wang Family Collection*, New York 1999.

5 Melinda Takeuchi, *Taiga's True Views. The Language of Landscape Painting in Eighteenth-Century Japan*, Stanford 1992, pp. 52, 103.

6 Cf. Chino Kaori, 'The Emergence and Development of Famous Place Painting as a Genre', *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* (2003), vol. 15: *Japanese Art. The Scholarship and Legacy of Chino Kaori*, pp. 39–61, here p. 47.

image.⁷ The intellectual ink painting of the Kanō School (established in the fifteenth century), which drew on the Chinese tradition of literati painting by scholar-bureaucrats, had to be simplified to be reproduced in the linear technique of the woodcut. Courtly subjects entered the realm of popular culture, and so did the illustrations that traditionally accompanied them. Richly illustrated classics of Japanese literature gradually supplanted Chinese iconographic conventions to give rise to an autonomous Japanese style of illustration.

Illustrated by the otherwise unknown artist Nakamura Eisen, an edition of the *Hundred Poems* published in 1692 features highly stylised depictions of rain in several illustrations – usually in the form of lines of diagonal hatching in the empty upper part of the composition. These lines rarely encroach upon the landscapes beneath them and thus do not lend much depth to the composition (ill. 3).

The rise of *ukiyo-e* (pictures of the floating world) in the late seventeenth century, when woodblock prints came to be seen as works of art in their own right rather than just illustrations, unleashed a veritable flood of images upon the major cities in Japan. In addition to traditional stories, new, more topical subjects emerged that drew on the world of theatre and entertainment. Stars of the *kabuki* theatre were linked with historic figures and themes.

Torii Kiyonobu I (1664–1729), one of the first members of the Torii School which was closely associated with the theatre and specialised in painting posters, signboards and promotional material for the popular *kabuki* theatres, produced portrait-like images of actors in their signature roles (ill. 4). Made in 1718 and still hand-coloured rather than colour-printed, his woodcut *Sanjō Kantarō II as Yaoya Oshichi and Ichimura Takenojō II as Koshō Kichisaburō* not only shows the two actors, but also a garden lily, a corner of a hut and an elegant umbrella. This should have been quite enough to identify the figures and the scene – it was, after all, a scene from a well-known stage play – but the artist also included parallel hatched lines to suggest rain, which, like the rest of the woodcut, were later coloured in red and yellow. The rhythmic pattern of these evenly spaced lines fills the upper part of the composition without actually becoming part of the scene depicted below.

In 1712, a few years before this woodcut was produced, one of Japan's most important encyclopaedias was published. Consisting of 106 chapters in 81 volumes, the *Wakan Sansai* (Illustrated Sino-Japanese Encyclopaedia) was the first illustrated encyclopaedia to be published in Japan. In form and content it draws on the Chinese *Sancai Tuhui* (Pictorial Compendium of the Three Realms) of 1609.⁸ But the *Wakan Sansai* is no mere copy of the Chinese original. Although much was adopted from it, there is also a great deal of material that is surprisingly different and new – we might call it typically Japanese. The people listed

7 Cf. Ekkehard May, 'Buch und Buchillustration im vorindustriellen Japan', in: Sepp Linhart, Susanne Formanek (eds.), *Buch und Bild als gesellschaftliche Kommunikationsmittel in Japan einst und jetzt*, Vienna 1995, p. 45–74, here p. 47.

8 On the history of East Asian encyclopaedias, cf. Marc Winter, 'Enzyklopädien im chinesischen Kulturraum – die „leishu“'. Gigantismus und materiell manifestierter Machtanspruch in der chinesischen Tradition', Paul Michel, Madeleine Herren, Martin Rüesch (eds.), *Allgemeinwissen und Gesellschaft. Akten des Internationalen Kongresses über Wissenstransfer und Enzyklopädische Ordnungssysteme*, Aachen 2007, pp. 145–183, on the *Sancai Tuhui* pp. 169–171.

were well-known in Japan; everyday items reflect Japanese customs of the time, as do clothing and architecture. The chapter on the human body and anatomy, on the other hand, reveals European influence. The first three volumes deal with the heavens. The sun and the moon are described in the first – as crow and hare, as was the custom in the Sino-Japanese tradition, but also by means of astronomical sketches, as they were known from the western literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The second volume deals with the constellations and the third with meteorological phenomena, neither of which features in the Chinese *Sancai Tuhui*. The following subjects are treated in greater detail: fog, hoarfrost, dew, graupel, hail, snow, rain, wind, mist, sky, clouds, rainbow, comets, shooting stars. Each of these meteorological and astronomical phenomena is accompanied by a small illustration that presents it as part of a narrative landscape scene. What is striking about these illustrations is that very few of them follow the traditional Japanese iconography. Thus thunder is represented by the weather god *Raijin* furiously beating his drums. His partner, the wind, however, is not represented as the wind god *Fūjin* with his inflated windbag, but as a windswept willow tree. The depiction of clouds in East Asia is governed by a rich and well-established iconography, yet the illustration of the entry on clouds features only two kinds: the traditional type, which resembles a *hui* mushroom, and, above, small square formations that can be identified as cirrocumulus cloudlets despite their extreme schematisation. The upper third of the illustration accompanying the entry on rain (ill. 5) is filled with dots suggesting clouds, the lower with the roof of a house and bamboo bending under the wind. Rain bursts from the clouds in the form of diagonal lines of hatching.

These examples suffice to suggest that the illustrator looked not only to the canon of traditional sources, but also further afield. The following excerpts of the entry are notable for their scholarly scientific approach.⁹ The entry begins with an exposition on the different spellings and pronunciations – Sino-Japanese *u*, Chinese *iyui* and Japanese *ame* – followed by a list of the different types of rain:

Light rain, strong rain, continuous rain (for more than three days) and the clearing up or end of rain, clear weather. Evaporating water forms clouds and comes back down as rain. The 'Shiming' [a Chinese encyclopaedia compiled around 200 CE] says: 'Rain is like the wing of a bird which spreads in flight.' [...] Rain mixed with snow [sleet] is referred to as 'snow-rain', rain dripping from the roof as 'drop-rain' and the draining rainwater as 'rain-rivulet'. The 'Anten monjo' [apparently an otherwise unknown encyclopaedia] says: 'It is raining when the sun essence above the clouds and the water essence below them separate. The essences of the cold and of the humidity are located at the heart of the clouds. When they are turned over, they dissolve and it rains. When water is heated, for example in cooking, it rises and becomes steam which has the look of a cloud. In rising, it dries (and cools down), turns into water, comes down and takes the shape of rain.' The 'Shinreikyō' [an otherwise unknown sutra] says: 'Above the four oceans there is a man who is riding swans. [He is wearing] white clothing and a dark headdress. Twelve boys are following him. They are riding horses as though they were flying. He is called the messenger of the River Prince. He comes from a land in which the rain comes pouring down in sheets.'

⁹ I am grateful to Mine und Bernhard Scheid for the translation into German.

The following pages deal with further special types of rain: rain showers, the rainy season, late autumn rain and uncanny rain. They are followed by the entry on rain prayers (*amagoi*). The commingling of mythological explanations for the phenomenon of rain with attempts at physical explanations is remarkable for the period, as is the commingling of different iconographies. The illustrator used ancient Japanese symbolic images as well as images of comets or rainbows that seem to originate in an entirely different tradition. In his study *The Art of the Japanese Book* Jack Hillier speculated that European prints may have served as models for early Japanese book illustrations.¹⁰ But hardly anyone dares pursue this idea further, however tantalising it may be. Suffice it here to mention just one more thing: European – above all German – popular prints dealing with extraordinary storms, inexplicable natural events and atmospheric or celestial phenomena¹¹ are often illustrated in a similarly gauche fashion as the *Wakan Sansai Zue*.

Whatever this may mean for the history of the depiction of rain in Japanese prints, the hatched lines became a standard pictorial device that could be deployed in a variety of ways. Three examples from the second half of the eighteenth century demonstrate the creativity of the *ukiyo-e* artists in the treatment of rain.

Even though Ishikawa Toyonobu's colour woodcut of 1750–1760 is called *Two Beauties and an Attendant* (ill. 6), this image is really a development of the *sampuku-tsui*, a triptych of prints or *kakemono* (hanging scrolls) showing young beauties. Ishikawa Toyonobu (1711–1785) evidently loved the format, but in this print he fused it into a single image. Three figures are shown leaning into the driving rain drawn in emphatic diagonal hatched lines. Their robes are billowing and an umbrella is held up against the blustery wind. The weather is clearly the main subject of the print. The diagonal hatch lines only make sense in combination with the wind. The rain begins to take centre stage.¹²

One has to look closely at the print *Praying for Rain (Amagoi)* from the series *Fashionable Seven Komachi* by Shiba Kokan (1747–1818) to recognise the celebrated poetess Ono no Komachi (ill. 7).¹³ A beauty, the central figure of the composition, is helped with her toilet by her attendants while she is contemplating a woodcut showing Ono no Komachi at the gate of a shrine. The veranda door is slid open, and the gaze is directed into the distance across the roofs to a distant rain shower, which is rendered in a way that is strikingly similar to that of the illustration in the *Wakan Sansai Zue*. Thus the rainy landscape is just a reference to the title which only becomes comprehensible when we look at the picture within the picture and the text above the image. Such *mitate-e* ('look and compare pictures'), which played with multiple layers of symbolism and allusion, were a popular genre of *ukiyo-e*. Here the view becomes a picture within the picture, opening a second layer of meaning.

10 Jack Ronald Hillier, *The Art of the Japanese Book*, vol. 1, London 1987, p. 64.

11 Cf. Wilhelm Hess, *Himmels- und Naturerscheinungen in Einblattdrucken des XV. bis XVIII. Jahrhunderts*, Leipzig 1911; Bruno Weber (ed.), *Wunderzeichen und Winkeldrucker. 1543–1586. Einblattdrucke aus der Sammlung Wickiana in der Zentralbibliothek Zürich*, Dietikon (Zurich) 1972; Axel Janeck, *Zeichen am Himmel. Flugblätter des 16. Jahrhunderts*, exh. cat. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg, Nuremberg 1982.

12 It is intriguing to compare this print with Katsushika Hokusai's woodcut *Ejiri in Suruga Province* from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, in which the wind surprises a group of travellers.

13 On Ono no Komachi, see Bernhard Scheid, pp. ###-###.

Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806) was well-known for forging his own artistic path through the floating world. He introduced new subjects, offered customers a glimpse behind the scenes of the Edo-period pleasure quarters and entertainment districts and pioneered novel techniques and new ways of looking. Like many of his contemporaries, he was interested in three-dimensionality, but also in light and shadow, day and night, i.e., in the atmospheric pulse of the day. Describing his colour woodcut *Husband and Wife in an Evening Shower* (ill. 8), several reviewers wonder at the apparent inconsistency of the closed umbrella in the pouring rain. They also criticise the depiction of the rain as a mere two-dimensional background to the two figures.¹⁴ The print invites two interpretations: It can be read as a reference to the night rain of the traditional *Eight Views*, but also as a take on the tradition of the 'umbrella picture'. An evidently drenched couple in partly dishevelled clothing – a semi-erotic allusion – steps out of the rain. They appear to have arrived at their destination; sheltered from the wet, they are shown under the roof of a front door. In contrast to Shiba Kokan's print, in which the rain functions merely as a symbolic allusion, here the stylised downpour acquires landscape character. It becomes a key part of a sequence of events and anchors them in time and space.

Every bit as experimental as Utamaro was the eccentric Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) whose long career saw him adopt and shape many artistic trends. His picture book *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*¹⁵ – published in three volumes over a period of about fifteen years from the mid 1830s to the late 1840s – contains several landscapes of near-impressionist resolution. He succeeded in capturing the mood of a certain time of day or season and the feel of the landscape. Among his pithiest compositions is the print *Fuji in a Downpour* (ill. 9). Peasants in raingear and large hats cower under the rain. The way the figures are drawn suggests that the path leads deep into the landscape which, in turn, is suggested by the dense vertical lines of the rain alone. All that is recognisable is the ghostly silhouette of the mountain. Eschewing the use of contour lines, Hokusai used the rain to delineate the landscape and the composition of the image. The rain is not only part of the landscape, it is the landscape itself. Working on his various series devoted to the iconic mountain, Hokusai introduced a compositional innovation that was to have a profound impact on later Japanese and Western art and that is also present in *Fuji in a Downpour*. By positioning the rain in front of the landscape, like a transparent film or screen, he created a kind of layered space that transformed the traditional vertical stacking of landscape masses, in which forms further away are stacked above those closer to the viewer, into something that is closer to the recessive space of Western perspective.

Hokusai's key rival was Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858).¹⁶ Vying with each other for fame and sales, the two artists created ambitious series of landscapes of a scope that went far

14 Cf. Timothy Clark, Shūgō Asano, *The Passionate Art of Kitagawa Utamaro*, exh. cat. British Museum, London, vol. 2, Tokyo 1995, p. 210, cat. no. 341.

15 Henry B. Smith (ed.), Hokusai. *Hundert Ansichten des Berges Fuji*, Munich 1988.

16 On the landscape prints by Hokusai and Hiroshige, cf. Johannes Wieninger, Andrea Pospichal, *Eine gefährliche Stelle. Berühmte Ansichten aus rund Sechzig Provinzen von Ando Hiroshige* (catalogue CD), Vienna 1999; Johannes Wieninger, *Fuji – der Berg, den es nur einmal gibt*. With a contribution by Josef Kreiner (catalogue CD), Vienna 2001; Johannes Wieninger, 'Die Welle von Katsushika Hokusai – ihre Stellung in der

beyond that of the traditional *Eight Views* or *Twelve Months*. So it is not surprising that the period between 1820 and 1860 is widely regarded as the zenith of *ukiyo-e* landscape imagery. By the late seventeenth century the Chinese format of the *Eight Views* – originally set on the Xiao and Xiang rivers where they empty into Lake Dongting in Hunan Province – had come to be applied to the area around Lake Biwa in Ōmi Province northeast of Kyoto, and the ancient sacred pine tree near Karasaki on the shore of the lake became a central motif of several series of prints. In Hiroshige's *Night Rain at Karasaki* (ill. 10) the rain falls in fine vertical lines as night descends upon the landscape, turning everything to shades of grey. The curtain of heavy rain forms a barrier between the viewer and the silhouetted scene.

In his *Ochanomizu in the Rain* (ill. 11) Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861) arrived at a similar conception. The viewer is standing on a bridge, looking along the river towards Fuji. The vista was a celebrated view of Mount Fuji, captured in numerous woodcuts. Kuniyoshi goes further than Hiroshige in dissolving the landscape into monochrome volumes; his drenching, steady rain falls in even more closely spaced vertical lines that seem to have been drawn with a ruler.

At this point, one should draw a direct formal comparison with the *katagami*, which are, after all, the central subject of this publication. Stripe patterns and images – the boundaries are blurred – represent a parallel development in woodblock printing and *katagami* patterning which became possible because of the early realisation that rain could only ever be depicted by focusing on its ornamental and rhythmic qualities.

Utagawa Hiroshige's *Cuckoo Flying in the Rain*, a colour woodcut of c. 1831 in the slim vertical *tanzaku* (poem card) format, is notable for its highly ornamental composition which is entirely determined by the dynamic diagonals of the rain. The cuckoo, the rain, the lines of the poem and the landscape suggested in the lower part of the composition all follow the same emphatic diagonal in their headlong dash from the upper right to the lower left – the standard reading direction of East Asian pictures. Once again, we find the requisite resonances of the subject of the night rain, while the call of the cuckoo heralds the coming of summer. This motif, which also enjoyed great popularity as a textile ornament (traditional *kimono* patterns and colours are closely linked to the rhythm of the seasons), bears witness to the shared artistic aspirations of applied art and *ukiyo-e*.

The death of Hokusai in 1849 released Hiroshige from the pressure to compete with his archrival. Over the course of the following years he produced some of the most extensive series of landscapes in the history of *ukiyo-e*. His use of a westernised perspective allowed him to develop novel compositions with a specific layering of planes that very often involved a large detail in the foreground, contrasting with the deep view of the landscape and reinforcing the effect of the perspective.

The composition of Hiroshige's *Distant View of Mount Oyama from Ono in Hoki Province* (ill. 13), a print showing rice farmers at work, is fairly conservative, but it is technically

Kunstgeschichte Ostasiens und ihr Einfluss auf die Kunst Europas', Hans-Günther Schwarz (ed.), *Die Welle. Das Symposium* (= Schriftenreihe des Instituts für Deutsch als Fremdsprachenphilologie, volume X), Munich 2010, pp. 171–180; Brigitte Moser, Beate Murr, Johannes Wieninger, *Ukiyo-e reloaded. Die Sammlung japanischer Farbholschnitte im MAK-Wien* (catalogue DVD), landscape chapter, Vienna/Ostfildern 2005.

interesting for its unusual depiction of rain. Printed in white lines, it is falling steadily but gently, not adding unduly to the burden of the wet work in the rice paddies. This subject had been established in a *waka* (a short poem composed in Japanese) by Ki no Tsurayuki (872–945) which served as an inspiration for April in several series of prints devoted to views of Mount Fuji over the course of the twelve months of the year.¹⁷

Hiroshige's view of *Yamabushi Valley* (ill.14), which can be read as an answer to Hokusai's *Ejiri in Suruga Province* from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, captures a rather more blustery scene. A gust of wind surprises two figures travelling along a river. Not only the trees bend under the force of the wind, even the heavy rain itself, falling from black clouds, is whipped up. The force of the violent rainstorm is suggested by a flurry of sweeping diagonals laid across the print, their light colour reflecting the colour of the paper. Barring the viewer from entering the pictorial space, this screen-like curtain of driving rain becomes the main subject of the image.

Sudden Shower over Shin-Ōhashi Bridge and Atake (ill. 15) from the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* is one of Hiroshige's last colour woodcuts and arguably one of the best-known Japanese prints. Travellers crossing a bridge in the rain is a subject with a long tradition (cf. ill. 5); it was probably intended to emphasise man's powerlessness in the face of the force of nature. Neither end of the bridge is visible; what makes this print so fascinating is the fan-like division of the image into three planes, one above the other, in manner that is comparable to the traditional stacked space of East Asian landscape painting. The scene is pummelled by a heavy rain, but it differs markedly from the rain pictures published in the artist's *Famous Views of the Sixty-odd Provinces*. Here the rain is depicted in thin black and grey lines of uneven length. Running at different angles rather than neatly parallel, they create the impression of rain falling *in* the picture and not just in front of it. The depiction of the rain runs counter to the traditional depiction of space and fuses the three planes into a single coherent composition.

Hiroshige died just ten years before the collapse of the shōgunate, which gave rise to the greatest political and social transformation in the history of Japan. The three late rain pictures exemplify an end-point in the development of Japanese landscape painting of the Tokugawa shōgunate (1603–1867). Rain was never really a central theme of Japanese landscapes, but it was always present. And, as often in the history of art, such marginal, secondary subjects lend themselves more readily to the study of how a theme developed than a major one with a well-known iconography. The progression from symbolic allusions to rain to the graphic compositions of Hokusai and Hiroshige occurred over many centuries. In that time, the subject of rain evolved into a truly Japanese theme that inspired generations of artists to ever new interpretations. Cautious attempts to find formally based answers to the question *How does the rain get into the picture?* must not blind us to the simple fact that Japan's relatively high annual rainfall was – and is – a mixed blessing, and that the everyday travails that come with it were a natural subject for the artists who sought to capture the floating world of Edo-period Japan in popular prints.

¹⁷ Takeuchi 1994 (see note 5), p. 103.