

## Dual Visions of Plum Trees in Japanese Painting of Edo Period

Jiayu Zhou<sup>1, a \*</sup> and Xiaopei Cui<sup>2, b</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 33 Livingston Ave, New Brunswick, NJ, USA, 08901

<sup>2</sup> 229Taibai Road, Northwest University, Xi' an, P. R. China, 710069

<sup>a</sup> jz763@scarletmail.rutgers.edu, <sup>b</sup> xiaopeicui@nwu.edu.cn

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**Abstract:** Due to the intensive cultural exchange between China and Japan, the Japanese paintings shared many similarities with Chinese traditional motifs; the plum tree was one common motif in Chinese art and literature. There are three kinds of paintings in Edo Japan, Rinpa, Kano and Literati paintings. Different schools serve for different social classes. Each of them employed distinctive methods and style in drawing plum trees. According to the analysis of three plum tree paintings in Edo Japan, I conclude that there is a dual vision of plum trees in Japanese painting. One vision is Chinese and masculine, and the other is indigenous Japanese and feminine.

### 1. Introduction

During Japan's Edo period, there was no more war under the strict control of Tokugawa Shogunate. In the stable society, Japanese society enjoyed a large culture and art boom. Shogunate implemented the Isolation Policy, which banned the trade with foreign countries except China and the Netherlands, so that Chinese culture and art still were still able to circulate to Japan at that time[1]. During the Ming and Ch'ing Dynasty, Chinese art exerted great influence on Japanese art[2]. Many Chinese traditions such as its literature and Confucianism also spread to Japan. Similarities between the art of these East Asian countries can be found in their shared combination of visual and written art forms, with poems being found alongside related paintings. Due to the intensive cultural exchange between China and Japan, the Japanese paintings shared many similarities with Chinese traditional motifs; the plum tree was a common motif in Chinese art and literature. Japanese artists from different schools draw it differently, because some schools received more influence from Chinese art while some stick to Japanese indigenous art. Their different ways of interpreting and illustrating the motifs was due the classes they served and the motives of their artworks. As a result, some Japanese artist painted plum trees in a feminine manner while some painted it with a masculine touch, which formed the dual vision of the plum tree in Edo period.

### 2. Background

Plum Trees (see fig.1) was attributed to Ogata Kenzan from Rinpa school. Rinpa school emphasized more on students' talent instead of his lineage[3]. Compared with Kano school, which was stricter about its students' lineage, Rinpa school was more loose and open to others. It mainly served the merchant class with their stated Japanese indigenous style. Rinpa school was known for its flat decorative pattern, applied art, and various forms of artworks[4]. The color

they used usually had high saturation. The landscapes in Rinpa art are usually Japanese local landscape scenes, such as low-slope hills.



Figure 1. Plum Trees, Ogata Kenzan (1663-1743)

Kano Sansetsu, the artists of Old Plum Tree (see fig.2), is a Kano artist. Kano school was regarded as the most prestigious art school in early Edo period, because it enjoyed the patronage from Tokugawa Shogunate. Known for its special mixture of Chinese and Japanese styles, it served the military class. All the Kano artist from the Kano family and received very strict “imitating” training to keep the lineage[5].



Figure 2. Old Plum Tree, Kano Sansetsu (1589-1651)

For Plum Tree in Snowstorm (see fig.3), the painter Katsu Jagyoku is a literati artist, whose motives of creating the painting is to express himself, rather than preserve one lineage or a certain style of painting. Literati paintings in Japan were heavily influenced by the late Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties in China; [6] they largely employed Chinese motifs, such as three friends in winter (bamboo, plum tree and pine tree, called “sui han san you” in Chinese). Literati paintings were also called Nanga paintings due to the style originated from Southern China, which is more self-expressive, amateur, and calligraphic[7].

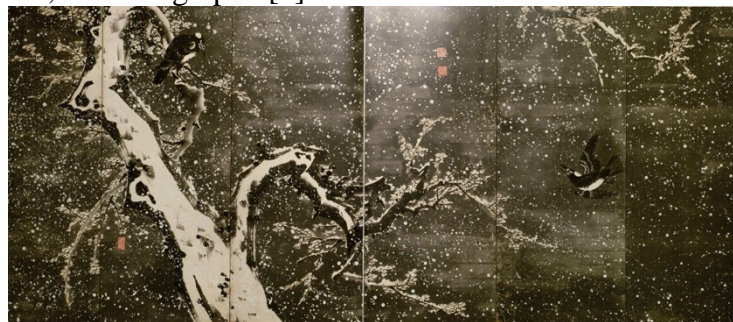


Figure 3. Plum Tree in Snowstorms, Katsu Jagyoku(1735-1780)

### 3. Case Study

For the content of the paintings, three artists chose different seasons to depict plum trees. In Plum Tree (see fig. 1), Kenzan put the plum tree in an early spring scenic. On the right of the painting, the plum tree is short and horizontally spreading, growing on a curving sloping hills. Looking from right to left, there is another pine tree located on the lower level of the hill which only shows its top half. It leads readers to create an imagery scene that many plum trees in the nature are blooming at that time, suggesting a thriving spring is yet to come. The six-panel folding screen was painted on a golden foil, implying that thick layers of pigment were needed to cover the original golden background. The color is highly saturated, especially the greenish brushes on the plum tree's trunk, branches, and the hill. Different from traditional Chinese painting, traditional Japanese paintings employed many colors such as saturated green. The gently unfolding posture of the plum trees and the flowers around the tree create feminine characteristics in the painting. Even the hill is softly curved, which also echoes the indigenous Japanese landscape, unlike the majestic Chinese mountainous view. The brushstroke in the painting is curved and soft, especially in the hill area and the trunk area, the lightness changing from one brushstroke to another. This suggests the painting was not quickly painted with very firm brushstroke, rather, it is very carefully painted and detailed-oriented. All in all, the plum blossom was depicted as a symbol of newly fresh life of spring, a nicely decorated woman waiting for the appreciation of others.

Ogata Kenzan's painting was most likely used as a decoration for leisure events. Art from the Rinpa school was mostly bought by merchants who, though politically lower than the military class, were very wealthy and had entertainment and self-cultivation needs. Rinpa paintings like Plum Tree can fulfill their need to enjoy art and socialize with others. The decorative aesthetics of the Rinpa painting can lift owner's artist taste. The deep meaning contained in the painting can cultivate the literacy of the owner. During the social event, there were many folding screen brought by various people. Exchanging views of different paintings also helped merchant-class people to socialize.

However, in the painting Old Plum Tree (see fig. 2), the ambience is changed. Looking from right to left, the painting shows a withered and zigzag plum tree surprisingly with blossoms on it. The flowering plants around the plum tree suggest the painting is depicting an early spring, the same with the painting Plum Tree. But what makes the ambience of the two paintings different are the brushstrokes and colors they each employed. The Old Plum Tree is depicted using a very firm brushstroke with deep greenish brown. Compared with the highly saturated red and green in Plum Tree, the color in the Old Plum Tree is more evenly mixed and uniform. The light area is a goldish yellow while the shadow area is a dark greenish brown. Also, the depiction of the plum tree's posture is distinctive from the former painting. The plum tree's posture in former painting is depicted as gently unfolding, while in Old Plum Tree the plum tree is drawn strictly vertically and horizontally. Since Sansetsu is known as a sinologist with extensive knowledge about Chinese paintings and artists[8], his painting shows great influence from Chinese symbolic meaning of plum trees. Old plum trees in Chinese literature represent the indomitable characteristic during "the prolonged exposure to wind and sun" [9]. In regard to the painting itself, even though the plum tree is very old and withered, its energy to grow branches far from its root and the ability to bloom after a chilly winter is irrepressible. The posture of the old plum tree is like a majestic dragon in Chinese motifs that contains much power and energy. Its branches rise up and down from right to left of the painting, just like a strong-willed man's life will down turn and up turn but he will never give up in any situation. Its longevity and

indomitability are like characteristics of a literary man celebrated in Chinese literature. The old plum tree shows the male-dominated characteristic, extremely opposite to the feminine personality of the plum tree in the former painting.

Nonetheless, femininity can be found throughout the painting. Even though the old plum tree is masculine, there were still many tiny flowers blooming along the branches. On the second panel (from right to left), flowers lined up on the widest and strongest part of the trunk. On the left most side of the painting, a cluster of flowers stretches from outside of the frame towards the plum tree. Its bright color and elegant posture seem like a woman that is appreciating the masculinity of the old plum tree and its ability to survive the winter and begin a new year. This painting conveys an idea that man and woman in the society are living and cooperating harmoniously. Linked to the social class Kano painters served, this kind of painting with plants or landscape is usually put in the private hall of ruling-class people. Paintings of such topic were used to show the integrity or the ruling ideal of the rulers to make themselves an ideal model for the citizens. In the painting *Old Plum Tree*, feminine flowers and masculine plum trees are a great set for symbolizing an ideal social image that man was fighting for country and woman was popularizing the nation. All in all, this painting is a combination of masculinity and femininity.

In the *Plum Tree in Snowstorm*, the Chinese male motif is even more seen. As a literati painter, Katsu Jagyoku even ignored the color in the painting, used straightforward ink brush to depict the plum trees in the snowstorm, with blossom still. In *Tradition Unbound*, it is said that “Literati painting is paintings by scholars, who emulated Chinese Scholar-Painting models. Referred to in Japanese as *bunjinga* (“literati painting”) and *Nanga* (“southern painting”)” [10]. It originated in Southern China, and emphasized the self-cultivation and self-expression of scholar. Compared with Kano school, it focuses less on the transmission of lineage and the uniformity of the style; in contrast, it focuses on the inner expression of the personality or ambition of the literati artists. [11] Compared with Rinpa artists, the literati painting is less about marketplace and commerce. Because the literati artists usually come from samurai class or have townsman parentage, their social status and fortune are well enough so that they do not need to draw to make a living. [12] In Chinese literati poetries, the winter is the least popular season to draw. More attention is given to spring and autumn. [13] However, in this case, the painter still chose to draw the plum tree in a winter scene, which indicates that he has an unusual admiration of the plum tree in cold winter. Different from the former two paintings, the literati painting is drawn on the white background rather than the golden foil. Purely black and white ink shows the Southern Chinese painting style. Its sense of space is more obvious than two other paintings. This is largely due to the techniques the artists employed to draw the background. Unlike the even gold foil backgrounds of the former two painting, the background of *Plum Tree in Snowstorm* is artificially drawn by quick brushstroke horizontally back and forth. The effect of this techniques is the uneven background with different level of darkness. These layers of ink illustrate the light and shadow in the distant view, which enhances the sense of space. The white major “negative space” stands out by its surrounding black ink. The wide and quick brush used to paint the trunk is called the Chinese “broken ink” [14], which usually the symbol of motion or power. The short “broken ink” on the trunk is the holes of the trunk. The verticality of the “splash ink” suggested the brutal wind was roaring around the plum tree. Even painter did not draw wind in the painting, but the visible character of his brushstroke calls readers’ imagination about a snowstorm with brutal wind. Given space to extend the narrative, readers will have deeper understanding of how indomitable the plum tree is.

The literati painting was often used to indicate the emotion or personality of the painter. There are red seals on the painting. The one placed by the tree proclaimed that “he, (Jagyoku), established a style of his own” [15]. Another seal near his signature, “contains twenty characters that boast that he exhausted all the technical means to express the beauty of nature” [16]. Jagyoku’s confidentiality of capturing shapes quickly and precisely and his passionate to represent nature are shown on the painting. With the self-expression motives, the Jagyoku chose to rely on Chinese motif, Chinese ink, and Chinese brushstroke to illustrate the pure masculinity of the plum tree. No femininity was referred in this painting at all. It is entirely about self-expression.

#### 4. Summary

Chinese version of plum tree is more masculine and Japanese version of plum tree is more feminine. They both existed in the art of Edo Japan. Painters used different approaches and gave them different shapes and background setting to reinforce the plum tree’s characteristics. Different illustrations of plum trees reveal the different needs of the painter or paintings’ owners in Edo Japan. For the merchant class, decorative value, self-cultivation and socialization are the main reasons for them to buy paintings, so that they choose the Plum Tree from Rinpa school. For ruling class, expression of ruling goals and integrity what they need to “advertise” their leadership, so that military class tends to choose the Old Plum Tree from Kano school. For scholar class, self-expression and self-cultivation are their reasons to create painting, so that they usually go with Chinese southern style painting which is more amateur. Showing off is not their purpose, instead, the combination of literature and painting is what they valued. In a nutshell, the different needs of different social classes result in the masculine and feminine versions of plum trees in Edo art.

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