Totoya Hokkei (1780-1850)

Japan

Qingao Riding a Carp

circa 1820, Edo period (1600-1868)

color woodcut (*surimono*)

20.9 x 27.8 cm
William Bridges Thayer Memorial

1928.7851

Essay by JiYeon Kim

The issue of longevity and success are universal human wishes. Art in East Asia often represents these wishes in various forms such as paintings, sculptures, and prints. Beyond rituals and personal devotions in the three main Asian religions (Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism), images of religious or legendary figures have served as popular subjects in art to inspire viewers to approach the divine realm in East Asia. It is generally believed that divine beings have extraordinary powers to grant wishes, unlike humans who have limited abilities. By representing and possessing images of supernatural beings in the divine world, people hoped to access good fortunes through the powers of these beings. In this regard, art has been an important vehicle that connects viewers and divine beings. This *surimono* (摺物, literally, printed matter), titled *Qingao Riding a Carp*, shows an example of a divine Chinese sage popular among the elite in seventeenth and eighteenth century Japan. Qingao (琴高, in Kinkō Japanese) is the main figure in this luxurious print who guides viewers to his divine realm of immortality.

Qingao was an imperial advisor of King Kang of Song (328-280 BCE) and Daoist immortal who lived in the Warring States Period of China. According to *Liexian zhuan*[1] (*The Series of Biographies of Immortals,* or *Ressenden* in Japanese), which was translated into Japanese and published during the Edo period, Qingao excelled at playing the *qin* (琴, Chinese zither) and at painting. One day he mastered the art of immortality. After having traveled around the Hebei area for about two hundred years, he rode a dragon into the Zhuo River, promising his disciples that he would return. He eventually reappeared on the back of a red carp coming out of the water. After staying for a month with humans, he again vanished into the water.

As seen in this story, the Daoist immortal Qingao was a scholar and high-ranking official at court who attained immortality. Daoism was never introduced to Japan as an organized religion. Unlike China in which Daoism stood as a religion with Buddhism, Daoism did, however, settle in Japan (and Korea) as part of Chinese culture and thought. As a philosophy from Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) China, which was later imported to Japan, the concept of immortality integrated into Japanese people's lives. Qingao's identity as an immortal, therefore, became much more significant as a symbol of longevity rather than as the model of a Daoist sage.

Along with the issue of longevity, this *surimono* also reflects the fundamental wishes for worldly success. The carp has traditionally been considered an emblem of scholarly and official achievement in China and Japan. Chinese legends say that when a carp leaps the rapids at the Dragon Gate of the Yellow River it can become thereafter a dragon. This feat is compared to that of a scholar who attains academic success. Namely, the perseverance of the carp indicates the

[1] *Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳 is a collection of stories of Daoist immortal, allegedly compiled by Liu Xiang (劉向), the scholar from the Han dynasty in China (206 BCE-220 CE). The Daoist canon Daozhang (道藏) includes it. During the Edo period in Japan*, Ressenden* became popular among poets and artists. Stories of Chinese Daoist immortals or legendary figures in *Ressenden* were depicted in *surimono* and other types of prints.

endeavors required to become successful in academic fields and public offices. In Japan, the carp's symbolism is extended to general good fortune.

This auspicious image of Qingao was likely enjoyed among the members of *kyōka* and *haiku* groups. In order to celebrate the arrival of spring or special occasions, *kyōka* and *haiku* group members exchanged luxurious prints (*surimono*) with one another as presents. This *surimono* of Qingao was made by *ukiyo-e* artist Totoya Hokkei (魚屋北渓, 1790-1880). Hokkei, who was a pupil of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), designed this *surimono*, which was commissioned by a member of an Edo *kyōka* group for a gift to a friend. The main members of such literary circles were affluent merchants and samurai. Their *kyōka* poems composed for *surimono* characteristically revealed their profound knowledge and wit in classical East Asian literature. Famous Edo printmakers, like Hokusai and Hokkei, were commissioned to produce *surimono* from *kyōka* or *haiku* poetry groups. Hokkei, as a professional *ukiyo-e* artist, spent about fifty years making *kyōka* illustrations and *surimono*. His career tells us that he was also familiar with classical literature, such as *Ressenden,* which became popular during the Edo period. In the 1820s, Hokkei and other pupils of Hokusai officially designed many prints of historical and legendary figures from the Chinese and Japanese classics. This print of the Chinese immortal Qingao, created in 1820, visually responds to the literary tastes of skilled poets within the poetry circles.

Typical of many *surimono* prints during the Edo period, this print of Qingao must have been designed to celebrate the return of spring at the beginning of the New Year. Two poems written on this image suggest the enjoyment of reading about the two different realms of humans and immortals in the spring. Two poets of Edo *kyōka* groups contributed these poems located on the bottom left of this *surimono*. Written by a poet named Kosenrō Rakuzumi, (reading from

right to left) the first poem states: "Apart from drugs against old age and death, I also turn to books, so I enjoy the sense of spring." Another poem written by Yomo Utagaki Magao, leader of the Yomo circle of poets, echoes Kosenrō's, stating: "Count all the great carp's scales, read the entire master's works and grasp his nature on the long spring days."[2] These poems celebrate the coming of spring and propose enthusiastic study of a master's works. By reading classics, rather than focusing on the medicinal religious ways of Daoism, Kosenrō seeks a sense of the spring of an immortal realm through literature. Magao's response to Kosenrō's poem elucidates that Qingao's nature as a scholar who achieved eternal life in an immortal realm can be understood through reading masterworks in Chinese classics. Qingao is said to have eagerly studied to become an immortal and extended his lifespan through the religious practice of Chinese Daoism, such as isolated living in strict austerity and meditation. Yet, as seen in the two poems written on this *surimono*, Japanese poets and artists in the Edo era acknowledged Qingao as the paragon of the respectful scholar from China, rather than as a Daoist sage in religious practice.

Examining Hokkei's visual rendition of Qingao, however, he appears as a supernatural being in the image of a scholar. Qingao elegantly sits on the back of a huge carp, reading a manuscript in deep contemplation. His robe is much like that of a Han Chinese scholar and his finely drawn hair flows in the air with the movement of the carp. In the clouds, where the carp is swimming, Qingao is depicted as a divinity from the heavenly realm, in the way as other gods in the Chinese Daoist pantheon. This image of Qingao is intended to reveal his supernatural ability and existence, freely traveling between secular and immortal worlds. In harmony with the two poems, Qingao's visual appearance as an ideal scholar inspires the viewer to study literature. As a symbol of interest in literature and the social position of learned elites, this scholarly image

[2] Stephen Addiss, *Japanese Ghosts & Demons Art of the Supernatural* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1985) 63.

conveys the wish to lead a peaceful and affluent life with the blessing of longevity, which is comparable to a spring day.

This *surimono*, *Qingao Riding a Carp*, reflects what poet groups, consisting of learned samurai and wealthy merchants, desired to share and wish among themselves. The Qingao motif is said to have been very popular during the Edo period, in prints and paintings, decorated dishes, and *netsuke* (a miniature sculpture which serves to hold portable containers with a cord from the robe's sash, called *obi*). This popularity proves that the motif of Qingao was not accepted as an exotic or advanced culture of China, but as a symbol of long life and success in seventeenth and eighteenth century Japan.

For Edo *kyōka* poets, this *surimono* could provide an opportunity to enjoy artistic conversations. In this poetic and visual artistry, the Chinese scholar Qingao is a supernatural being who belongs to the divine realm of immortality, where learned members of a *kyōka* group wish to be led. A carp, the son of the Dragon King, plays the role of the scholar's vehicle in Qingao's travel to the place of eternal spring. In order to enjoy their status as elites and hopes for good fortune such as longevity and secular success, Qingao conveys the perfect divine image, satisfying artistic and scholarly favors of the Edo elite.

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