

Identities on Fire: East Meets West on the Palette of Shiba Kōkan (1738–1818)

Giovanni Tarantino

University of Florence, Italy

GUY MONTAG, the protagonist of Ray Bradbury’s celebrated “book burning” dystopia in the novel *Fahrenheit 451*, is a firefighter in a world where every building is now fireproof. Bradbury’s world is obsessed with speed for speed’s sake: people must remain on their feet and run all day. A world drugged by bland pastimes, in which almost everyone believes they are happy, helped also by the fact that reading, reflection, and dialogue have been abolished. There are no more front porches, gardens, or rocking chairs to sit on and while away the time: “They had time to think. So they ran off with the porches.”¹ A world in which the humanities have been removed from the educational system. In this world, a few people stubbornly—and subversively—continue to hide away books at home, at risk to their lives. In this world, firefighters start fires, to burn the few surviving books and, if necessary, their unproductive, transgressive, lawbreaking owners. Montag, a fire-raising firefighter, dissatisfied with his own life, gradually realizes that “there must be something in books, things we can’t imagine . . . there must be something there. You don’t stay [to burn with them] for nothing.”²

A disturbing and timeless representation of totalitarian power, and of the inevitable insignificance of a life protected by technology but emptied of history and culture(s), *Fahrenheit 451* deserves mention, in the context of an essay dealing with fire and contending cultural transfers, for a passage in the hysterical monologue of Captain Beatty, Montag’s superior officer, who is determined to restore his subordinate’s belief in the peril of books. Beatty argues that books, and the critical thinking they encourage, should be seen as a direct threat to equality. “Minorities” found so many things in books objectionable that people finally abandoned debate and started

This essay expands on work from my article “Disaster, Emotions and Cultures: The Unexpected Wink of Shiba Kōkan (1738–1818)”, published in *Rivista Storica Italiana* CXXVIII/2 (2016).

¹ Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (London: Harper Voyager, 1999), 83.

² *Ibid.*, 68.



burning books.³ The Arendt scholar Simona Forti has noted how the keenest interpreters of totalitarian ideology, including Hannah Arendt and Claude Lefort, denounced “the paroxysmal and ultimate extremization of that monistic obsession, first metaphysical and then theological, for oneness, which, in order to produce a residue-less identitarian functionality, must eliminate the obstacles, real and presumed, of an alterity often constructed *ad hoc*. . . . The pseudosacralization of the community, of the collective dimension, takes place at the expense of plurality, of contingency, of becoming.”⁴ The theme of the recurrent tensions between universalistic aspirations and cultural specificities—not least cultural-specific emotional scripts—will emerge in the following pages, which for the most part are a reflection on “grammars of identity/alterity”⁵ inspired by a late Tokugawa Japanese scroll depicting a fire.

In his much cited “The Cultural Basis of Emotions and Gestures” (1947), Weston LaBarre recounted that the author and distinguished Japanologist Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904) once observed that “the Japanese smile is not necessarily a spontaneous expression of amusement” but a rule of etiquette instilled and nurtured from an early age. It is a nonverbal language that Europeans often appear unable to fathom. Hearn noted that the Japanese child is always instructed to don a guise of happiness so as not to inflict his sorrows on his friends: “The story is told of a woman servant who smilingly asked her mistress if she might go to her husband’s funeral. Later she returned with his ashes in a vase and said, actually laughing, ‘Here is my husband.’ Her white mistress regarded her as a cynical creature: Hearn suggests that this may have been pure heroism.”⁶

In this essay, I set out to offer a historically contextualized comparative analysis of culturally diverse coping strategies. In so doing, I shall work on the assumption that feelings, as Susan J. Matt succinctly put it, “have a neurological basis but are shaped, repressed, expressed differently from place to place and era to era” and that the historian, to conduct transcultural analyses, needs to be alert to the multiple ways in which “difference is negotiated” within contacts and encounters—from selective appropriation to rejection or resistance.⁷

The relationship between emotion and expression might of course be heavily “contingent.”⁸ But leaving this issue to one side, the following pages are informed by an awareness of the historic problematics of two different but intimately correlated interpretative orientations. On the one hand is the tendency to presuppose that emotional strategies for coping with postdisaster trauma are universal or at least translatable, thereby disavowing the specificity and value of different emotional cultures. On the other, there is the inclination toward a lazily stereotypical representation of the conventional boundaries of emotions (including “national emotional [auto]stereotypes”⁹) ducking the challenge that historical entanglements pose for sound comparative analysis.

³ Ibid., 78.

⁴ Simona Forti, “*Totalitarismo e religioni politiche*,” in *Pluralismo e religione civile: Una prospettiva storica e filosofica*, eds. Gianni Paganini and Edoardo Tortarolo (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2004), 228; translation mine.

⁵ Andre Gingrich and Gerd Bauman, *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004).

⁶ Weston LaBarre, “The Cultural Basis of Emotions and Gestures,” *Journal of Personality* 16, no. 1 (1947): 53.

⁷ Susan J. Matt, “Current Emotion Research in History: Or, Doing History from the Inside Out,” *Emotion Review* 3, no. 1 (2011): 118.

⁸ Jerome Neu, *A Tear Is an Intellectual Thing: The Meanings of Emotion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 25.

⁹ Nicole Eustace et al., “AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 5 (December 2012): 1493.



Although “earthquake theology” was the predominant current of thought in the early modern transatlantic world, quite a sophisticated scientific, or at any rate philosophical, debate flourished. A number of lengthy comparative works were published in the eighteenth century, especially after the earthquakes in Lisbon, Portugal, in 1755 and the Calabria region of Italy in 1783, and other minor ones in New England in 1727 and 1755. These works described the effects of earthquakes in detail and went to considerable lengths to source reliable accounts and discard emotionally charged testimony. However, natural causes still tended to be presented as secondary, in order not to buck the general consensus that earthquakes were essentially a form of divine intervention. The idea was that God punished humans for their misdeeds, or at the very least sent them a powerful warning, thus retaining a certain ambivalence as to whether punishment or redeeming judgement was the ultimate aim.

Early in the morning of November 18, 1755, for the second time in thirty years, New England was hit by a powerful quake. Though there were no victims, the city authorities prescribed many days of fasting in the days that followed, and the Puritan minister Cotton Mather was quick to downplay theories that were circulating about the secondary causes of the quakes:¹⁰ “Usually our earthquakes have natural causes assigned for them. . . . But it must be something more theological, that you are now to be treated with. *Let the natural causes of earthquakes* be what the wise men of enquiry please, *they* and their causes are still under the government of HIM that is the *GOD of Nature*.”¹¹ Attributing natural disasters to collective acts of behavior that have incurred the wrath of God(s), or to evil spirits that need to be appeased—in the process stoking fears that such events might recur with even more devastating effects—has historically been an obvious emotional expedient for reinforcing a sense of psychological dependence on established civil and religious authorities.¹² Earthquakes, and the fires that often follow in their wake, have always been particularly useful in this respect at all latitudes and have been used to play upon the emotional vulnerability of their survivors and to introduce especially invasive forms of control over private conduct (even down to the way people dress).¹³

Consider, for example, the foundation of the Kitano Shrine, one of the most important government-supported Shinto shrines in Japan. The shrine was constructed in 947 CE to appease the angry spirit of Sugawara no Michizane (ca. 840–903), a statesman, scholar, and poet who spent his final years in exile after falling foul of a conspiracy by the Fujiwara family, his rivals at the Heian court. Following his death, Kyoto, then the capital of Japan, was hit variously by floods,

¹⁰ Maxine Van de Wetering, “Moralizing in Puritan Natural Science: Mysteriousness in Earthquake Sermons,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43, no. 3 (1982): 417–38.

¹¹ Cotton Mather, *The Terror of the Lord: Some Account of the Earthquake That Shook New-England, in the Night, between the 29 and the 30 of October. 1727* (Boston: printed by T. Fleet for S. Kneeland, 1727), 15.

¹² The Romans believed that volcanic activity and earthquakes were caused by Neptune, the god of the sea. The image of a dolphin found on many coins minted during the reigns of Titus and Domitian may have been the expression of a wish to appease Neptune following the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. Erasmus once famously claimed (in his commentary in *Adagiorum chiliades* on the motto *festina lente*) that the Italian scholar and cardinal Pietro Bembo (1470–1547) had noted that the image of the dolphin and anchor (the famous publisher device of Aldus Manutius) depicted on a denarius minted under Titus succinctly reflected Aldus’s twin goals: the dolphin symbolizes rapidity of production while the anchor suggests stability of purpose.

¹³ For more on how an earthquake was seized as an opportunity to press for strict control on women’s dress, see Charles F. Walker, *Shaky Colonialism: The 1746 Earthquake-Tsunami in Lima, Peru, and Its Long Aftermath* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), chap. 7.

famines, and fires, and those who had plotted against him began to die. His anger was reputedly placated after he was posthumously elevated to the highest civil rank and deified as Tenjin, the Shinto *kami* of scholarship (where *kami* refers, somewhat indistinctly, to spirits, powerful forces, earth elements, human emotions, and in general the essence of all things awe-inspiring)¹⁴. A certain ambivalence surrounded these deified victims, as they were able to trigger calamities but also to avert them or make them subside. Herbert Plutschow has plausibly suggested that Japanese political leaders sought “to appease the spirits of political victims” because, in so doing, they could at one and the same time account for catastrophic events and maintain the political status quo. If natural disasters were deemed to be the work of political victims, this meant they ultimately came under human political control, and once the disaster was over, leaders could claim that this had come about as a result of their own good offices and benevolent, pious rule. Deified victims were thus a key element in society and a focus for religious belief. They were also revered as oracle-delivering deities, and, as in ancient Delphi, they were called upon to predict the future. In this way, Japanese political leaders could manipulate the oracles to serve the ends of the state.¹⁵

The notion that purification rituals must be performed after natural disasters—a deep-rooted and persistent belief in Japanese history—and that events of large-scale destruction could lead to social change and wealth redistribution can also be seen in relation to the *namazu*, the earthquake-causing subterranean catfish of Japanese folklore.¹⁶

From at least the time when the Japanese Zen artist Josetsu (fl. 1405–96) produced *Hyōnenzu*, an ink painting of a man catching a catfish with a gourd—widely considered one of Japan’s most enigmatic artworks—it was commonly thought that earthquakes were the result of a giant dragon or snake moving around under the earth. On maps, the Japanese islands were encircled by a serpent-like dragon. The idea of a dragon/fish originated in general terms in China, where mysterious islands of immortals like Penglai were imagined to be floating in the sea on the back of a giant dragon, fish, or turtle. The Japanese island of Chikubushima on Lake Biwa was similarly pictured, floating on the back of a dragon/serpent. As time passed, this huge beast gradually became more and more closely associated with, and indistinguishable from, a giant catfish.

In the seventeenth century, a popular art form called *ōtsu-e* developed. These were images produced by temples in the city of Ōtsu, on the shores of Lake Biwa, and sold to tourist-pilgrims.

¹⁴ Sugawara no Michizane is still widely revered as the patron of scholarship in Japan. On January 2 of each year, students visit his shrines to seek help in important entrance exams, leaving their first calligraphy of the year as an offering. There are a number of extant versions of the *Kitano Tenjin engi* (Legends of the Kitano Shrine), sets of handscrolls illustrating Michizane’s life (from his miraculous appearance in his family as a child of six), death, and the posthumous revenge exacted by his angry spirit. For the most part they are based on the 1219 Jōkyū version held by the Kitano Tenmangū Shrine in Kyoto. The scrolls may have been intended to instruct as well as to placate. See Sara L. Sumpter, “The Shōkyū Version of the *Kitano Tenjin engi emaki*: A Brief Introduction to Its Content and Function,” *Eras Journal* 11 (December 2009), https://www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/1667400/ssumpter.pdf.

¹⁵ Unlike the Japanese, the Chinese did not make heroes out of the vanquished, considering defeat to be divine judgment and not a human achievement. Confucianists tended to make it the “victim’s fault.” The Chinese also regarded natural calamities as deriving from the displeasure of a “heaven” with official behavior “under heaven” rather than by victims seeking justice or revenge. See Herbert Plutschow, “Tragic Victims in Japanese Religion, Politics, and the Arts,” *Anthropoetics* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2000/Winter 2001), <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0602/japan.htm>.

¹⁶ Folk explanations of earthquakes existed alongside those based on the five agents of yin and yang, a system of ideas that developed in ancient China, whereby complementary opposite forces or tendencies are seen as underlying the world and its processes.



FIGURE 1. *Namazu-e* (catfish print). Japanese earthquake prints from the final decades of the Tokugawa period featured depictions of mythical giant catfish (*namazu*) which, according to popular legend, caused earthquakes. © National Diet Library, Tokyo, Japan.

One popular *ōtsu-e* motif depicted a human, or more often a monkey, catching a giant *namazu* with a bottle gourd. The metaphorical message of such images was that, with sufficient effort and determination, apparently impossible things can be achieved. During the eighteenth century, an idea gained ground regarding the deity of the Kashima Shrine, just north-east of Edo (Tokyo). It was believed to press down on an oval boulder called the “foundation stone” (*kaname-ishi*), which in turn held in check the head of an immense subterranean *namazu*. But when the deity was otherwise engaged, or simply distracted, the pressure was relaxed, and the giant catfish would start to wriggle around, with terrible consequences. The ensuing earthquakes caused severe structural damage to buildings and often set off devastating fires as well.¹⁷



One distinctive feature of the Tokugawa (or Edo) period (1603–1868)¹⁸ was the dominance of the military government (*bakufu*), based in Edo and headed by a *shōgun* (general). The emperor reigned in Kyoto, the traditional capital, but functioned mainly as a religious and cultural figure-head, and the imperial court was eclipsed in political terms. However, following the arrival of

¹⁷ Gregory Smits, “Conduits of Power: What the Origins of Japan’s Earthquake Catfish Reveal About Religious Geography,” *Japan Review* 24 (2012): 41–65.

¹⁸ This was the final period of traditional Japan under the shogunate established by Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), an age marked by internal peace and national seclusion.



FIGURE 2. Kashima, *kaname-ishi*, and *namazu*. The *kaname-ishi* rock, portrayed as a person, stands on the head of the catfish. © National Diet Library, Tokyo, Japan.

Matthew Perry, commodore of the United States Navy, in 1853, opponents of *bakufu* who wanted a *jōi* (“expel the barbarians”) policy turned to the imperial court as a symbolic counterweight to the *bakufu*.¹⁹ In late 1855, when the existing social and political order was crumbling—it was finally replaced by a modern-style, centralized state in 1868—a devastating earthquake offered the pretext for a sophisticated form of protest. This remonstrance was pursued by means of catfish picture prints (*namazu-e*).²⁰

Employing the “earthquake catfish” and other symbols to elude censure by the military government, anonymous entrepreneurs made and sold innumerable varieties of prints to air thinly veiled political views. More specifically, the *namazu-e* metaphorically suggested skepticism and doubt about the *bakufu*’s capacity for effective government, which had first begun to spread after Perry’s visits.²¹ Some prints show the ambivalent side of *namazu*, as at times they are pictured rescuing people from the rubble. Not uncommonly they were revered as “gods of rectification,” effecting social change and wealth redistribution through acts of destruction.²² In the *namazu-e*, though, the main focus of attention was on those people who typically profited from

¹⁹ From July 1853 onward, Commodore Perry visited Edo (Tokyo) with armed fleets, pressuring the military government to sign a trade agreement with the United States. The government lacked the strength to reject Perry’s demands outright, and a preliminary treaty was signed in March 1854.

²⁰ A set of over 400 different types of *namazu-e* prints were produced within weeks of the “Ansei Edo” earthquake that devastated Tokyo in November 1855. Interestingly, *namazu* are always black in the prints, just like Perry’s steam ships. See Gregory Smits, “Shaking Up Japan: Edo Society and the 1855 Catfish Picture Prints,” *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 4 (2006): 1045–78 (1062–66). The *namazu-e* phenomenon suddenly ended two months later when the government, which maintained a strict system of censorship over the publishing industry, cracked down on production. Only a handful are known to have survived, and most are accessible through the digital collections of the National Diet Library of Tokyo.

²¹ Not unlike classical Chinese political theory, which regarded portentous signs as the passing of heaven’s mandate from one dynasty to another, for most Japanese sudden and disastrous natural phenomena signalled—or could be read as doing so—the blunders of an inept government that had thrown society out of kilter with nature. See Gerald Groemer, “Singing the News: Yomiuri in Japan during the Edo and Meiji Periods,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 54, no. 1 (1994): 233–61 (245).

²² See Hannah Gould, “Exhibiting Disaster: The Great Kantō Earthquake, 1923,” *Collections* 15 (2014): 46–52.

earthquakes. A catfish dressed as an itinerant priest holds a Buddhist rosary and prays together with a carpenter, a plasterer, roofers, a physician, a lumber merchant, and a rickshaw puller. As they all stand to gain from earthquakes in one way or another, they pray to assuage their sense of guilt. Another print features a crowd of kimono-clad catfish and newly prosperous building workers celebrating their profitable partnership in a red-light district. Most notably, the *namazu-e* reveal a distinctly ironic and irreverent emotional response to natural disasters.²³



Humor was a fairly typical feature of premodern Japanese disaster narratives, especially those relating to fires, a major hazard in Japanese towns and cities in the Tokugawa period. The three-day Meireki fire in the first month of 1657 was the most devastating of them all. Months of dry weather had made buildings in Edo tinder dry, and the flames swept through the streets, trapping thousands of people in their homes. Of those able to flee, many tried to save treasured possessions by hurriedly piling them onto wheeled chests, but the flames advanced so quickly that they had to abandon them. To make matters worse, the fire was followed almost immediately by a severe snowstorm, and up to 100,000 people are thought to have died, either in the fire itself or in its chaotic aftermath, when having lost their homes and livelihood, many more succumbed to cold and hunger. It took nearly two years to rebuild the city.

While the news of the burning of Edo prompted the Dutch theologian and historian Arnold van den Berghe (1625–83) to seek parallels in his own cultural memories (the fires of Troy, Rome, or London were nothing to him compared with Edo),²⁴ in Japan itself, just four years later in 1661, the Meireki fire was the subject of an odd narrative called *Musashi Abumi* (*Stirrups of Edo*).²⁵ Vivid and detailed descriptions of the fire are woven together with the sometimes blatantly comic tale of a man named Rakusaibō. After losing his entire family in the fire, Rakusaibō retreats from the world, takes the tonsure, and sets out on a long, solitary pilgrimage to temples and shrines between Edo and Kyoto, including a visit to the Kitano Shrine.

In the story, on the first day of the fire Rakusaibō picks his way among the corpses searching for his mother, finally finding what he believes to be her remains. The family gathers to mourn her, but then she appears, alive and well, even though they initially take her for a ghost. When it becomes clear she really has survived, they complain that prayers offered up for her rebirth in paradise have been a waste of time and effort. Rakusaibō celebrates his family's narrow escape from the fire with such enthusiasm that when the flames flare up again at the end of the first day, he is dead drunk. His family puts him in a wheeled trunk to carry him to safety but is forced by the

²³ See Cornells Ouwehand, *Namazu-e and Their Themes. An Interpretative Approach to Some Aspects of Japanese Folk Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1964); Smits, "Shaking Up Japan," 1047, 1055–61, passim; M. William Steele, ed., *Alternative Narratives in Modern Japanese History* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 4–18; and Gennifer Weisenfeld, "Laughing in the Face of Calamity: Visual Satire after the Great Kantō Earthquake," in *Disaster as Image: Iconographies and Media Strategies across Europe and Asia*, eds. Monica Juneja and Jerrit Jasper Schenck (Regensburg: Schnell und Steiner, 2014), 125–34.

²⁴ Arnoldus Montanus, *Atlas Japannensis... English' d... by John Ogilby* (London: printed by Tho. Johnson for the author, 1670), 411.

²⁵ Published in Kyoto in book form, *Musashi abumi* is commonly attributed to Asai Ryōi, the most prolific popular writer of the seventeenth century. A modern Japanese edition of this text appeared in 1988 (edited by Kōta Sakamaki and Takashi Kuroki). This essay makes use of a selective translation and an enlightening discussion by Peter Kornicki in his "Narrative of a Catastrophe: *Musashi abumi* and the Meireki Fire," *Japan Forum* 21, no. 3 (2010): 347–61.

ferocity of the flames to abandon both it and him. When Rakusaibō comes round, he mistakes the trunk for his coffin and, poking his head out and surveying the blackened devastation all around him, thinks he is in hell. A series of comic misunderstandings then ensues and are only cleared up when he meets an old friend. At this point, he learns that his home has been burned down, his wife and children are dead, and his treasures and possessions are all lost. He therefore decides to shave off his hair, dye his clothes black, and become a monk. As Peter Kornicki has convincingly argued, the humor of the narrative could perhaps be regarded as a secular parallel to Buddhist withdrawal: in other words, emotional involvement is avoided by resorting to humor instead of religion. Indeed, although the descent into hell was a long-standing Japanese literary topos, Rakusaibō's story appears to gently poke fun at Buddhist perceptions of the infernal afterlife.²⁶



Before outlining a second—and this time visual—humorous interlude in premodern Japanese disaster narratives,²⁷ I must first introduce another European character: Jan van der Heyden (1637–1712), one of Holland's finest painters of city views. Van der Heyden is an unusual figure, famous not only for his art. He studied mechanics and designed a street lighting plan for Amsterdam, on the strength of which he was appointed as the city's director of municipal lighting (1669–70). As a result of his endeavors, Amsterdam became the best-lit city in Europe, and lamps he designed soon appeared on the streets of Berlin and Leipzig and other cities, even finding their way to Japan.²⁸ Later, van der Heyden invented a pumping mechanism, wrote and illustrated a book about fire pumps (1690), and became rich by manufacturing and selling firefighting equipment. He produced a series of fascinating textual and visual recollections of fires, which read like journalistic reports, and the prints he made to show how his pumps worked are of more than technological interest; they offer almost intimate insights into daily life in Amsterdam. What is of interest here is a technical illustration entitled *A Comparison of Old and New Firefighting Methods*, one of a set of preparatory drawings for his 1690 *Brandspuitenboek* (*The Fire Engine Book*), now held in the Rijksprentenkabinet collections at the Rijksmuseum of Amsterdam.

The left side of the drawing depicts old firefighting methods, which involved taking water from a canal in buckets and filling the tank of a large, heavy fire engine. This had a fixed nozzle that could move only in a circle. The right side shows a new and much smaller fire engine: water is drawn from the canal with a trestle and a flexible canvas hose and pumped through a thin leather fire hose that can be taken right into the building.²⁹ Van der Heyden's fire engines, like his lamps,

²⁶ Kornicki, "Narrative of a Catastrophe," 351–52.

²⁷ A further example is found in Kawasaki Shigeyasu's *Haru no momiji*, a record of a big fire that broke out in Edo in the spring of 1829. See T. Kobayashi, "Crimson Leaves in Spring—A Record of a Disaster: A Review of Late Edo Intellectual Climate," *JOSA* 15–16 (1983–84): 86–101.

²⁸ On the expansion of the "legitimate social and symbolic uses of the night" in early modern Europe, see Craig Koslofsky, *Evening's Empire: A History of the Night in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²⁹ See Peter C. Sutton, *Jan van der Heyden (1637–1712)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Susan Donahue Kuretsky, "Jan van der Heyden and the Origins of Modern Firefighting: Art and Technology in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam," in *Flammable Cities: Urban Conflagration and the Making of the Modern World*, eds. Greg Bankoff, Uwe Luebken, and Jordan Sand (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 23–43; and Susan Donahue Kuretsky, "Saving Amsterdam: Jan van der Heyden and the Art of Firefighting," in *Urbs incensa: Ästhetische Transformationen der brennenden Stadt in der Frühen Neuzeit*, eds. Vera Fionie Koppenleitner, Hole Rößler, and Michael Thimann (Berlin and Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2011), 159–74.



FIGURE 3. *A Comparison of Old and New Firefighting Methods* (*Brandspuiten-boek*, 1690). Jan van der Heyden shows the advantages of his new inventions: the flexible fire hose and a more efficient fire engine.

also reached Japan,³⁰ as can be seen from a telling detail (which I discuss below) of a beautiful hanging scroll by the Japanese painter, philosopher, and cartographer Shiba Kōkan (1747–1818).³¹ The scroll is a very significant pictorial *mise-en-scène* of culturally diverse coping strategies and is a useful source in attempting to outline “a historically anchored hermeneutics of difference.”³²



Shiba Kōkan was the father of “Western style” oil painting in Japan and a prominent member of the eighteenth-century movement known as *Rangaku*, or “Dutch Learning” (*Ran* is the abbreviation of *Oranda*, Japanese for “Holland,” while *gaku* means “an academic discipline”). This

³⁰ Fire engines built after Jan van der Heyden’s design are held at the Tenjuan and Sekizan Zen-in temples in Kyoto.

³¹ Hanging scroll; ink, color and gold on silk; 401/8 x 19½ in. (102.2 x 49.3 cm); signed *Shunparo jo Kokan Shiba Shun kore [o] utsusu*, sealed *Shiba* and *Shun no in*. The scroll was sold at Christie’s in New York on March 22, 2001 (Sale 9606: lot 241). Initially in the Ruth and Sherman Lee Institute for Japanese Art Collection (Clark Centre) in Hanford, California, it is now in the collections of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. A reproduction of the scroll first appeared in Anna Jackson and Amin Jaffer, eds., *Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500–1800* (London and New York: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2004), which was published to accompany an exhibition of the same name at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London from September 23 through December 5, 2004. It also served as the cover image of the special issue on emotions (published in 2016) of the leading Italian history journal *Rivista Storica Italiana*.

³² Juneja and Schenck, *Disaster as Image*, 20.

pioneering group of Japanese scholars and artists was deeply influenced by Western art and science, and many harbored anti-Buddhist and, above all, anti-Chinese views.³³

The scroll (perhaps a subtle metaphor for broader cultural and medical comparativism) shows representatives from Japan, China, and the West gathered around a table. The Japanese man is given pride of place in the center of the trio,³⁴ while on his left is the (probably Dutch) Westerner, a learned man of medicine, dressed in early eighteenth-century attire. He holds a book on anatomy, open to a page with an illustration of a male skeleton on a cane. This image may have been derived from an illustration of Andreas Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica*, transmitted to Japan by way of a 1734 Dutch translation by Gerard Dichten of Johann Adam Kulmus's *Anatomische tabellen* (1725), in turn translated in 1774 as *Kaitai shinsho* (*New Anatomical Atlas*).³⁵ The Confucian scholar is shown solemnly observing the other two people present; on the table is a scroll of his writings, a *ruyi* ("as you wish") scepter, and a Chinese vase containing what look like medicinal herbs.³⁶

³³ The *Rangaku* movement has been read as an intellectual attempt to criticize and downplay the overwhelming influence of Chinese civilization and writing on Japanese culture. It was roughly contemporary with the *Kokugaku* ("native learning") movement. See Donald Keene, *The Japanese Discovery of Europe, 1720–1830* (London: Routledge, 2011 [1952, 1969]); Grant K. Goodman, *Japan: The Dutch Experience* (London and Dover, New Hampshire: The Athlone Press, 1986), 103–104, 193–97; and Benjamin A. Elman, "Sinophiles and Sinophobes in Tokugawa Japan: Politics, Classicism, and Medicine During the Eighteenth Century," *East Asian Science, Technology, and Society* 2, no. 1 (2008): 93–121. On *Kōkan*, see Calvin L. French, *Shiba Kōkan: Artist, Innovator, and Pioneer in the Westernization of Japan* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1974); a review of the work by David Waterhouse, "Leonardo or Proteus? The Art and Character of Shiba Kōkan," *Monumenta Nipponica* 31, no. 2 (1976): 189–98; and Georg Wiessala's introduction (evocatively entitled "The 'Japanese Leonardo' and the Asia–Europe Conversation") to *Enhancing Asia-Europe Co-operation through Educational Exchange* (London: Routledge, 2011).

³⁴ The Japanese man is clearly a samurai, his hand resting on a *katana*, a traditional curved sword with a single-edged blade and a long grip for both hands. Only samurai, the military nobility of medieval and early modern Japan, were permitted to carry swords, though the long Tokugawa peace meant they had little use for them. Many devoted themselves to the study of archaeology, literature, botany, anatomy, and medical science. Their interest in the latter reinforces the plausibility of a reading of *Kōkan*'s painting as an allusion to different medical cultures, with physicians and firemen both intent on tackling the imponderable force, but also the limits, of nature. The white snake wrapped around the samurai's wrist may allude to a propitious divinity (*kami*), although in ancient times it was associated with the imminence of disaster.

³⁵ Owing to the prohibition of foreign books since 1630, and then the expulsion of all foreigners except Dutch and Chinese merchants, for the best part of a century the Japanese had no access to Western scientific knowledge. Finally in 1720, the eighth shogun, Yoshimune (1684–1751), lifted the ban on all works except those relating expressly to Christianity. The first (more or less) complete translation of a European book was the *Kaitai shinsho*. The head of the translation team was the eminent physician Sugita Genpaku (1733–1817), while the woodblock prints were the work of the gifted young samurai Odano Naotake (1749–80), who rose to be one of the leading artists working in the Western painting style. There were many terms for this, including *Oranda-e* or *Horurando-e*. It is now generally referred to as *Ranga* ('*ga*', meaning picture). Interestingly, *Kōkan*, who was a townsman, complained publicly about the refined snobbery of the *Kaitai shinsho*: addressed exclusively to academic circles, it was rendered in opaque *kanbun* (pseudo-Chinese) rather than the vernacular. See Timon Screech, "Europe and Asia: The Impact of Western Art and Technology in Japan," in *Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe 1500–1800* (London: V&A Publications, 2004), 318; Timon Screech, *The Lens within the Heart: The Western Scientific Gaze and Popular Imagery* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 89; and Thomas M. Van Gulik and Yuji Nimura, "Dutch Surgery in Japan," *World Journal of Surgery* 29 (2005): 10–17.

³⁶ The Christie's online auction catalog entry suggests that the three worthies are a variation on popular illustrations of the unity of the three creeds, in which the Buddha, Lao-tzu, and Confucius are shown together, "or, in eighteenth-century Dutch learning circles in Japan (*Rangaku*), Buddha, Lao-tzu, and Jesus." A curious contemporary Chinese allusion to religious or rather philosophical syncretism is found in a 1780 screen painting comprising a double portrait of the Qianlong Emperor (1736–1795) and his poem questioning his multiple identities: "Is there one or are there two? / They are neither identical nor dissimilar. / One may be Confucian, the



FIGURE 4.
 Shiba Kōkan, *A Meeting of
 Japan, China, and the West*.
 © Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

other Moist, / Why should I worry, why even bother to ask myself?" (with the greatest difference between the two ancient philosophical systems being the Moist doctrine—so named after Mo Tzu—of universal love, which is incompatible with the basic Confucian doctrine of love with distinctions). See Ding Meng and Mae Anna Pang, *A Golden Age of China: Qianlong Emperor, 1736–1795* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2015), 103.



FIGURE 5. Kōkan, *A Meeting of Japan, China, and the West*, detail. © Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

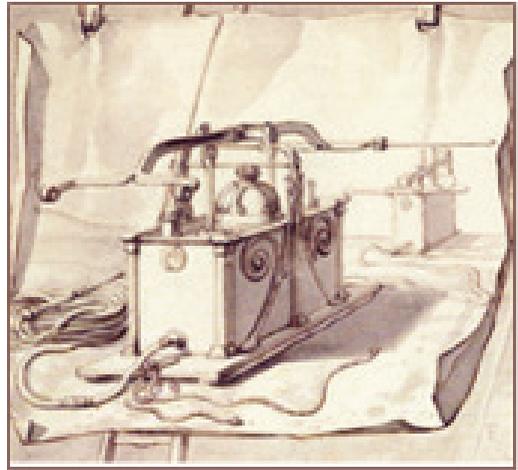


FIGURE 6. Jan van der Heyden, *A Comparison of Old and New Firefighting Methods*, detail.



FIGURE 7. Fire engine, Sekizan Zen-in Temple, Kyoto, Japan.



FIGURE 8. Fire engine, Tenjuan Temple, Kyoto, Japan.

The trio, though, comprises just one part of a much larger and even more interesting picture. Above them is a depiction of a multistoried pagoda enveloped in flames and almost totally consumed. Fire brigades of the three countries are attempting to put out the blaze. Each group has a different approach, but the obvious disparity in the effectiveness of their techniques betrays an ill-concealed comic intent. The Japanese team is presented as hefty sumo wrestlers: quite unperurbed, they observe the chaotic scene from a distance and use the water for their own personal ablutions.³⁷ The Dutch are using a modern pump and hose, indisputably invented by Jan van der Heyden, while the Chinese have mustered a large contingent to throw water on the fire using small traditional buckets.

The painting was necessarily produced after the publication of the second Japanese edition of *Kaitai shinsho* in 1798, when a “ploughman skeleton” first appeared.³⁸ It probably also dates

³⁷ The origins of sumo wrestling lie in the Shinto religion, and all ceremonies in sumo are related to purification. Forms of ritual dance in which a human purports to wrestle with a *kami* (a Shinto divine spirit) are still performed to this day at some Shinto shrines.

³⁸ Vesalius worked in a typical genre known as “moralized anatomy.” His skeleton is leaning on a grave digger’s shovel at the edge of an open grave, his vacant eye sockets lifted, and his mouth open as if in a scream. In the Japanese



FIGURE 9. Kōkan, *A Meeting of Japan, China, and the West*, detail. © Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

from the last of the three biggest Edo fires, the Great Fire of Bunka, which swept through the city in April 1806 and caused an estimated 1,200 deaths. In spring of the same year, Kōkan announced that he was giving up painting.³⁹ If my inference as to the date is correct, it is interesting and significant to note how he once again uses humor, very soon after a highly dramatic event, as a distraction to soften the emotional blow. But who is the butt of the artist's derision? Despite appearances—including the blatant fact that the European scholar appears to be sitting much closer to his Japanese counterpart than to the Chinese literatus, almost as if they are somehow in accord—the answer to that question is by no means obvious.

In 1788, Kōkan left Edo and traveled west to Nagasaki, the only Japanese port open to external trade. While there, he visited the Dutch trading enclave on the island of Dejima, absorbing as much Western knowledge as he could. Subsequently, he published several volumes on Dutch astronomy and did some etchings to illustrate Nicolaus Copernicus's heliocentric theory of the solar system. In an unpublished manuscript completed in November 1811, he spoke of the evils of his society. One of the causes is that "there has never been a tradition of scientific investigation in Japan or China, and that this is why Japanese people are ignorant." He continued: "We Japanese have no proclivity for scientific investigation. We concern ourselves with writing's fine, elegant phrases in an attempt to appear cultured, though what we say has no bearing on reality. We have the minds of women. All women are confused, believe anything, and have no sense of

reception of Vesalius's anatomical sketch, the scientific function of the image was maintained but the landscape and grave were not. The spade, which had a shape not known to the Japanese, functions only as a comfortable support for the subject's bent forearm. See Jacques Proust, *Europe through the Prism of Japan: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Elizabeth Bell (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 205.

³⁹ French, *Shiba Kōkan*, 109.

fact.⁴⁰ In his painting, then, Kōkan seems to imply that neither Chinese nor Japanese firefighting techniques can compare to those of Europe. What is more, the unemotional professionalism displayed by the Dutch firefighters appears to be presented as the right attitude to adopt when tackling catastrophic events of this kind.

However, closer examination of a detail in the painting reveals unexpected shades of meaning, an ironic nudge and a wink at the viewer on Kōkan's part. The detail in question is the male skeleton illustrated in the book held by the Western doctor. The posture of the skeleton is slightly different both from Vesalius's original illustration and the one in the Japanese translation. In Kōkan's skeleton, the back of the left hand rests on the waist, a very common feature in Dutch portraits, while the macho, spatially aggressive elbow akimbo stands for the *vita activa* usually associated with military action.⁴¹ Quite clearly, then, it is intended to be a parody.



Besides recognizing the humor typically found in early modern Japanese disaster narratives, it is tempting to view Kōkan's painting as a metaphorical representation of intercultural mirroring. It seems possible to see in it the most inclusive of the three "grammars of identity," convincingly outlined by the late social anthropologist Gerd Baumann. There is no exclusive demarcation, Baumann argued, between identity and difference, and indeed identities and alterities should be regarded as "mutually constitutive or at least residually dialogical." Especially in the "orientalizing grammar," "what is good in us is lacking in them." But he added a subordinate reversal as well:

FIGURE 10. Michele Sarcone, *Istoria de' fenomeni del tremoto avvenuto nelle Calabrie, e nel Valdemone nell'anno 1783* (Naples, 1784), Annexed Atlas, Plate 20, Engraving by Antonio Zaballi.



⁴⁰ Ibid., 153.

⁴¹ See Joaneath Spicer, "The Renaissance Elbow," in *A Cultural History of Gesture: From Antiquity to Present Day*, eds. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 84–128; Zirka Z. Filipczak, "Poses and Passions: Mona Lisa's 'Closely Folded' Hands," in *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion*, eds. Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 68–88; and Lung-hsing Chu, "The Meeting of China, Japan, and Holland: Dutchmen in Japanese Prints during the Edo Period" (paper presented at the 2008 Design History Society Annual Conference in Falmouth, U.K., and made publicly accessible online).

“[W]hat is lacking in us is (still) present in them.”⁴² What this entails is the possibility of desire for the Other, and on occasion, perhaps even the potential for self-critical relativism. However, self-criticism is not equivalent to self-denial. Not even the West, with its acknowledged scientific superiority and its aspiration to establish human control over nature, seems able to point the way to a wise management of the emotions caused by a collective drama that so brutally shows the fragility of life.

While he greatly admired the Western world, in his final years Kōkan led a secluded life in the Engaku-ji Zen temple in Kamakura and spent much of his time meditating. Tired of Western scholarship, astronomy, and foreign instruments, he wore the rough robes of a priest and “found great satisfaction in helping others to understand the meaning of life.”⁴³

In the Age of Reason, illustrations of the 1783 earthquake in Calabria, commissioned by the Academy of Sciences in Naples, for example—where the traditional landscape and narrative elements were preserved only to convey the scale of the event—testified to the bold attempt by Western scholars to intellectually dominate nature and not be terrified of it.⁴⁴ The lesson Kōkan appears to have learned from his avid and admiring perusal of Western scientific treatises seems quite different: “Anyone who has studied astronomy and geography can look into heavens and feel the vastness of the universe; the earth by comparison seems but a tiny grain of millet. Men who dwell upon this minute, revolving world are like microscopic particles of dust. A person who fails to realize his insignificance, who presumes to consider himself great, simply demonstrates how very little he knows of the world.”⁴⁵

One cannot overstate the importance of the self-empowering Confucian tenet that harmony is achieved through abiding by natural laws and that the physical and emotional well-being of humans depends largely on their ability to establish a harmonious relationship with the environment—nor can one overstate the extensive influence of classical Confucianism upon Zen Buddhism.⁴⁶ In a self-portrait of 1810, Kōkan adopts a traditional iconography for scholars (*wenren*), his hands covered by the sleeves of his robe, and with the moderate appearance and emotional aloofness of the Confucianism alluded to in his extraordinary scroll.⁴⁷ Three years later, by now determined to become a disciple of the Zen priest Seisetsu at the Engaku-ji temple, Kōkan wrote his own obituary, signifying his death to the things of this world, and sent copies of the announcement to acquaintances around the country. To a friend, instead, he gave a painting of a puppet (the symbol of worldly success in this illusory existence), a crane, and a rooster. Overlaid onto the painting are some short verses, which, evoking the uncontainably destructive power of fire, bear witness to Kōkan’s new-found awareness, and meek acceptance, of human fragility:

⁴² Gingrich and Bauman, *Grammars of Identity/Alterity*, 4, 13, 20, 25 and *passim*.

⁴³ Quoted in French, *Shiba Kōkan*, 159.

⁴⁴ See for example Plate 20 in *Istoria de’ fenomeni del tremoto avvenuto nelle Calabrie* (Naples: G. Campo, 1784).

⁴⁵ Quoted in French, *Shiba Kōkan*, 149.

⁴⁶ “Against those who believed superstitiously that praying to Heaven would result in blessing and disobeying Heaven in disaster,” Xunzi (ca. 300–230 BC), in particular, sustained that “the natural course of Heaven could not be changed by human affairs, and natural laws ran their own course whether humans had behaved morally or not.... Since Nature does not have ‘emotions’ and ‘will,’ it cannot intentionally create harmony for human beings. To secure harmony between ourselves and nature, we should make use of natural laws for our own ends. We are the architects of our own fate.” Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 176–78.

⁴⁷ Kōkan’s self-portrait is held in the Kobe City Museum of Namban Art.

The fire burns,
Knowing not whence it comes, where it goes;
While it is burning
We must do our best.⁴⁸

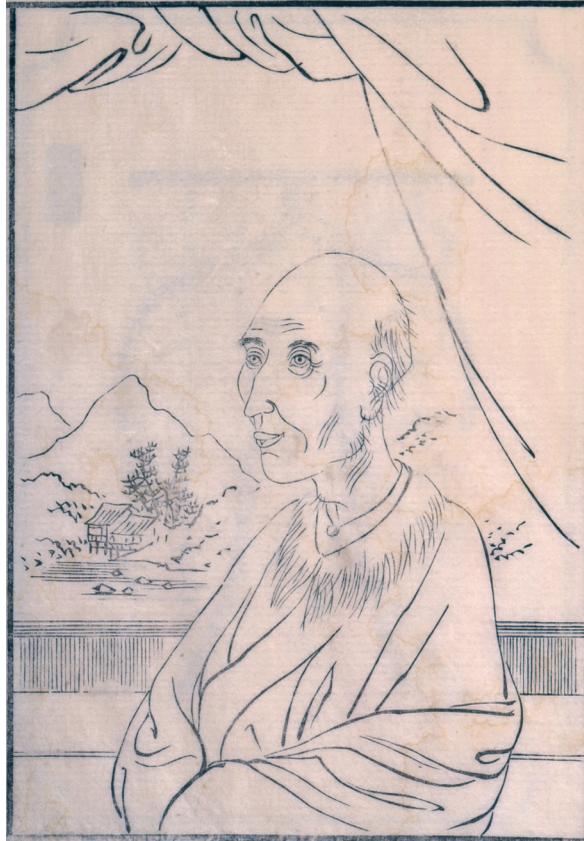


FIGURE 11. Shiba Kōkan, self-portrait.
© Kobe City Museum of Namban Art, Japan.

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⁴⁸ Quoted in French, *Shiba Kōkan*, 156–59. The painting (color on paper; 48 x 24.3 cm) is extant, and held at Waseda University, Tokyo.