

**'Real' Go in Ukiyo-e: Some Artistic Aspects of  
*The Physician Hua Tuo Scraping the Bone of Guan Yu to Treat an  
Arrow Wound* by Kuniyoshi Utagawa**

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*The Sept. 28<sup>th</sup> AGA e-Journal briefly mentioned the two right panels of a famous Kuniyoshi ukiyo-e triptych that appeared on the front cover of the Sept. 23 Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA). However, it*

*failed to add that there was also an excellent article that accompanied it, written by Dr. Robert Golub, who edited the issue. For the time being, it is not available on the Internet for non-subscribers, and can only be accessed in libraries.*

*While Dr. Golub was writing the article, a correspondence developed over the question of why there are 21 instead of 19 lines on the go board in the picture, and why a real game was not being portrayed. Drawn into the discussion and interested in making the contents of the article available to the go community, I summarized it and added an edited version of the Kiseido Internet Art Gallery article on the subject, along with some gleanings from other sources and my own comments and analysis on this question.*

## The Kiseido Article

(Edited with some additions, including an update from Kiseido that has not yet been posted)

(<http://www.kiseido.com/printss/kuan.html>)

*In the closing years of the Bunsei era (1818-1830), Kuniyoshi Utagawa depicted a series of heroic characters from the 14<sup>th</sup> century Chinese novel Shuihu Zhuan (Water Margin) by Shi Naian. Almost destitute before he received this commission, their success made him popular and famous. Soon thereafter, he became known as 'Kuniyoshi of the Warrior Prints.'*

*Some years later, Sanguo Yinyi (The Romance of the Three Kingdoms) by Luo Guanzhong (who may have been the author or co-author of Shuihu Zhuan) was translated into Japanese by Konan Bunzan and later revised by Ikeda Touritei. This was a Chinese novel based on historical events and personages during the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. [Many of them were go players—see Shirakawa Masayoshi's *A Journey in Search of the Origins of Go* and my review in this e-library.]*

*The hero of the Romance was the famous general Guan Yu (Kuan Yu in the old Wade-Giles system and Kan U in Japanese). Guan Yu, often portrayed with red skin, was canonized as an Immortal in 1128 and deified as the Chinese God of War in 1594.*

*From 1836 to 1841, the story appeared in 74 installments under the title Ehon tsuzoku sangoku-shi, (Illustrated Popular History of the Three Kingdoms) and its illustrations were done by one of Hokusai's best pupils, Taito II. This translation was an immediate best-seller and it inspired Kuniyoshi to issue the first of many sets of woodblock prints depicting various scenes and characters from the novel. These prints were also very successful and reinforced Kuniyoshi's reputation as the premier designer of heroic subjects in the last decades of the Edo period.*

*This triptych was one of a set by Kuniyoshi that he published in 1853-54. It depicts a striking and memorable passage in Chapter 75 of Book XII of the Chinese novel. Guan Yu's arm has been struck by a poisoned arrow in the 219 AD battle of Fancheng, and he insists on having it attended to without fuss, and without using anesthetics and the usual iron ring tied to a post for stabilization. Since he didn't want to interrupt his go game . . .*

*. . . The surgeon, accordingly, pressed down with his knife and made an incision in the flesh as far as the bone, exposing the infected part. With his knife he scraped away at the bone, making a grating noise as he did so. Everyone who was*

*watching, soldiers as well as civilians, averted their faces and turned pale. Kuan Yu drank wine, ate some meat, cracked jokes, and played go, showing not the slightest sign of pain as the basin filled with blood. The surgeon scraped away the last of the infection, then applied medicine and bound up the wound with a silken cord.*

*Kuan Yu gave a hearty laugh and got to his feet. He turned to his lieutenants and said, 'Now I can stretch my arm as before, without trouble. Truly, this is an eminent doctor!'*

\* \* \* \* \*

Dr. Golub began by focusing on four persons, two of them unseen, whose interactions should be taken into consideration when viewing this print. These were the warrior Guan Yu, the physician Hua Tuo, the artist, Kuniyoshi Utagawa, and the viewer. (1)

Although Dr. Golub doesn't discuss it (and a number of other details) due to space restrictions, to add to the complexity, it is not in actual history that the first two are united. Rather, it is within a psychologically 'symbolic history' because the surgeon died 11 years before Guan Yu was wounded.

In the resulting popular imagination, the doctor and patient are joined because of their high moral qualities. Despite being the god of war, Guan Yu's first instincts were not to fight, while Hua refused any payment for the operation because his primary duty was to medicine.

In C. H. Brewett-Taylor's translation of Luo Guanzhong's writings, after the operation, Hua exclaims:

*... 'Indeed, Master, you are a marvel! I have spent my life in the art, but I have never seen such a patient as you, Sir. You are as if not from the earth but heaven.'*

*Here as surgeons, there physicians, all boast their skill;  
Bitter few are those that cure one when one's really ill.  
As for superhuman valor rivals Kuan Yu had none,  
So for holy touch in healing Hua T'o stood alone.*

*When the cure was well advanced, Guan Yu gave a fine banquet in honor of Hua T'o and offered him a fee of a hundred ounces of gold.*

*But Hua T'o declined it, saying, "I had come to treat you, O General, from admiration of your great virtue and not for money."*

Hua was one of the first great physicians in China and is recorded as using anesthesia in surgery for the first time. However, to keep to the story line, Guan Yu curiously refused it. As to Hua's 'first use,' cannabis and opium's beneficial qualities would just as curiously have had to have been previously ignored. In any case, Hua's name is still used in China as a term of respect for a skilled and dedicated doctor because he also pioneered the treatment of parasites, toured the countryside to treat peasants and was a great teacher—hence Dr. Golub's article appeared in an education issue of JAMA.

Also, both men were united in their sufferings at the hand of the tyrannical warlord Cao Cao. The eventual victor and unifier of China, he was known for his cruelty, but also for his abilities as a great ruler and military genius who treated his officers like family. Additionally, he was a famous poet and, being an expert in the military arts, wrote many war journals. Early in these conflicts, he captured Guan Yu, but then promoted him to be his deputy general. A year later, Guan Yu left the ruler to fight him, but was captured and executed. Still, his head was buried with full honors by Cao Cao.

With Hua, the relationship with Cao Cao was also fatal, at least in the version Dr. Golub relates (there are other endings in the historical interweaving of facts and legends). In this version, Cao Cao suffered from headaches and Hua offered to perform brain surgery, but Cao Cao suspected an assassination attempt, because, (as in other stories), the physician was kept in his court under duress. (2)

The third character in this story is the artist and Dr. Golub showed in some detail how Kuniyoshi's background and life influenced this print. Born in Edo in 1797, he was the son of a textile dyer which probably accounts for the extensive and exquisite details of his portrayed kimonos. He was thus born into the vibrant merchant class, which was fuelling the gaiety of the prosperous and dazzling Ukiyo, the 'Floating World' of Edo. However, along with the general populace, he rebelled against the 1842 oppressive edicts of the Tenpo reforms—the attempt by the Tokugawa government to return Japan to the simplicity of the early days of the shogunate. Suddenly, strict censorship was imposed on worlds of theater, music and the arts. The edicts forbade, for example, the depiction of courtesans, actors, extravagant fashions and 'controversial' themes. Price controls were established to limit the quality and size of the prints and the number of colors that could be used.

Of course, resistance quickly arose as black markets came into being and artists started to put hidden meanings into their works. One way

Kuniyoshi responded was to identify himself with a 16th-century warrior leader, Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Born a peasant, Hideyoshi became known as Japan's 'Great Unifier' and in Kuniyoshi's day, he had become a popular, symbolic threat to the restrictive shogunate authority. Popularly believed to have been an avid go player, he also was thought to have sponsored the first national go tournament in 1588. (However, John Fairbairn casts doubt on all this in his *Go Companion* [Slate and Shell; 2009]). In any case, Kuniyoshi started using Hideyoshi's family crest—a paulownia leaf—as a seal while introducing hidden meanings and political satire into some of his works. Using monsters and demons, a vivid and famous example is print 6-4 in the Kiseido collection. (<http://www.kiseido.com/printss/p6-1.htm>).





*The Ground Spider Manifesting Demons  
in the Mansion of Prince Minamoto no Yorimitsu*

Prince Minamoto (948-1021 A.D.) or Raiko, his informal name, was a warrior who fought bandits, ogres and demons, the most famous of whom was the evil 'Ground Spider.' In one account, while dozing because of a mysterious, debilitating illness, he was threatened by a goblin sent by the Spider while two of his four retainers played go. The demons from the nightmarish 'other world' that Kuniyoshi introduced into this print have usually been interpreted as representing a roiling populace angered by the Tenpo reforms, while the sleeping Raiko is seen to symbolize an ineffectual Shogun, whose councilors are sitting around doing nothing but drinking tea and playing go.

However, according to a new, convincing theory, the meaning of the imbedded symbols in such objects as the flying banners of *two* armies indicate that these were the British and Chinese troops battling each other in the Opium War (1839-1843). This had ended with China's utter defeat and humiliation a year before Kuniyoshi published the print. Thus, across the middle space, which represents the Sea of Japan, the Mt. Fuji-shaped web the Ground Spider/goblin is draping over the dozing Shogun. This indicates that Japan may be the next victim of Western ambitions, ships and power.

Meanwhile, as in the other interpretation, the four councilors drink tea and play go—in other words, do nothing except pass the hated and ineffectual but ‘patriotic’ Tenpo edicts. (3)

The effect of the print was immediate and government censors quickly confiscated it and destroyed the woodcuts so that only a few hidden impressions survived. On the other hand, it was quickly copied several times with no listed publisher or censor seals for sale on the black market. One example was a triptych by Sadahide on the Kiseido site (No. 6-6) that was more than a copy. Instead, it was a commentary on the fate of Kuniyoshi’s efforts, since its central focus was the Chief Censor, standing with his lantern thrust forward and routing the terrified goblins, while even the Ground Spider rolls his eyes in alarm.

As for Kuniyoshi, he escaped with a fine and reprimand but Dr. Golub, in a later note, mentioned that the artist would play the game of releasing a potentially risky satirical print that would get popular exposure and then withdraw it and destroy the woodblocks, with lucrative black market results.

However, outwardly Kuniyoshi was forced to turn to safer subjects such as his continuing work in landscapes and, more importantly, to heroic and morally-themed works like the Guan Yu operation that portrayed a god’s calmness in the face of danger. It is significant that this ukiyo-e was published in the late spring of 1853 during the deepening crises and increasing fears of foreign encroachment. This was just months before Admiral Perry’s Black Ships shattered three hundred years of Japanese xenophobic isolation, which resulted in the end of the shogunate and undoubtedly the death of Shogun Ieyoshi. (As opposed to Raiko’s traditional recovery either before or after the demons are dispatched). (4)

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As for the non-artistic details in the Guan Yu work, the dark vertical text in the upper right of the right panel represents the title of the triptych. In all three sections, the paulownia seals appear in the small orange boxes at the bottom and the vertical bars above these are Kuniyoshi’s signature. This was to enable the sheets to be sold separately. To the right and left are a date seal (‘4<sup>th</sup> Month’) and the approval seals of two censors who Dr. Golub identified from Clark’s book as Kinugasa at the top and Murata at the bottom.

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Although at first glance the print's action seems centered on the bleeding arm, Dr. Golub points out how the color scheme and the arching bodies direct the eyes of the viewer towards the go game which unites the participants on levels beyond the visual and historical images. For Guan Yu, there are the honorable and balanced strategies and tactics of the game; for Dr. Hua, the anatomic expressions of eyes or lungs deal with the larger ideas of life or death. For the artist, there is the beauty of the game and its ties to Hideyoshi, his hero.

Meanwhile, the viewer is drawn into the game as a potential kibitzer, with the soldier about to place a black stone, his hand frozen in mid-air. But this is not a real game and this 21x21 board is also not real, thus the actual move will have no meaning.

It is curious that this was true of *all* ukiyo-e representations of go, at least until later in the Meiji era, when some portrayed the correct number of lines but not real game patterns. (One example is the Kiseido 10-10 print of two women playing go by Chikanobu (<http://www.kiseido.com/printss/p10-1.htm>). Richard Bozulich, in a private communication, suggested that this may be the ukiyo-e artists' counter to the increasingly popular realism of Western copperplate prints, lithographs and photographs.) (4)

In any case, two suggestions have commonly been offered for the lack of realism in the earlier prints. One is that the artists were 'lower class' and didn't know the game. The other is that this was done purely for visual reasons. For example, the stones in the Guan Yu print appear to be almost equal in number and are visually appealing. This is also true in the second Kuniyoshi and the 10-10 prints.

Dr. Golub suggested that this lack of meaning represents Kuniyoshi's sense of humor, though I would think that this interpretation might be more true of the second Kuniyoshi print—that the move on a board that isn't real will be as ineffectual as the councilors' other moves in the 'real world.'

Others have suggested that since viewers knew the correct number of lines (and the correct number of strings on lutes, which were also generally inaccurate), they didn't need a realistic portrayal, preferring instead to just buy and possess a 'go scene' or a 'lute scene.' On the other hand, fashionable kimono patterns and hair styles were scrupulously rendered, so it could be said that the artists simply gave the public no more and no less of what they wanted. (5)

However, I think the issue might be deeper and extend to all go ukiyo-e, whether the size of the board is correct or not,

First of all, it is simply impossible that an active and cultured patron and portrayer of the Floating World such as Kuniyoshi would be ignorant of the details of the game and how many lines are on a board, or what a real game looked like. Perhaps it could be argued that it was the cutters of the woodblocks that were ignorant, but then the artists would have had to approve, which is unlikely because Go was a ubiquitous feature of daily life in those days. Even courtesans needed to know how to play it (although the Kiseido site mentions that the geisha in the Four Accomplishments ukiyo-e were portrayed more for their beauty than for their go playing skills).

In answer to the idea that it was for purely visual purposes that artificial boards and games were composed, consider that abstract go boards and games in pictures could be what *freed* the viewers' gazes to revert back to the totality of the scene. It is perhaps the key to a mental 'externalization' or 'immortalization' of the scene because the mind fleetingly focuses on the full meaning of the 'Game of Go' and its uniting features in a composition, rather than getting ensnarled in the superficialities of a specific game.

These issues would be especially important in the case of semi-mythological ukiyo-e such as the Guan Yu print (where he would have to be shown winning). This is because the layout of such a game would have to take into account the historical sophistication of the strategies being used. Thus, what kind of game could be portrayed? The go of Kuniyoshi's time was very advanced so a sophisticated game that reflected this would belie the age of the scene to any go player. On the other hand, a less-than sophisticated game would besmirch Guan Yu. (Besides, the only game record from that period is thought to be a forgery because of the presence of a joseki that appeared later in history).

In other words, dating a ukiyo-e picture through hair styles or kimono patterns might be desirable in fashion-oriented ukiyo-e, but dating it with a go style would not be what an artist would want in a mythological setting—or even in a more contemporary one. In the case of the geisha playing go as one of the Four Accomplishments, for example, the same argument about the necessity for abstraction would apply—what level would a real game be, especially if the women were being portrayed more for their beauty than their go skills?

Or in the less time-bound case of the number of lute strings—what would accurate fingering have to look like if the number of strings were correct? Mentally, the viewer would be asking about what note was being played in what song and what would that mean? Lute players would be drawn into the same kinds of conscious or unconscious dilemmas that go players would be put if the depictions were accurate.

Thus, while real actors could be portrayed playing real roles in ukiyo-e, a real go game would have had to be played by real go players in a real go setting. And even if the setting was castle go or the move was a famous one, it is hard to imagine much of an artistic interest or a public demand for it.

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## Footnotes

(1) Dr. Golub noted that one of his sources on Kuniyoshi was a new monograph by Timothy Clark, which accompanied a recent exhibit on Kuniyoshi at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. The other was a chapter by Amy Reigle Newland in a monograph that is out of print: *Heroes and Ghosts: Japanese Prints by Kuniyoshi 1797-1861*, by Robert Schaap; Hotei Publishing (October 1999).

(2) Dr. Golub wrote in his note that one of the ideas that he had in his first draft but deleted for space was linking Guan Yu, Hua Tuo, and the Go resurgence with popular Japanese youth media. Guan Yu has been a hero in a number of video games as well as manga, and in television series and movies, including the recent *Red Cliff*. He also found Hua Tuo as a character in a video game and the title character of a movie.

(3) See *Ukiyo-e's Caricatures 1842-1905* by The Department of East Asian Studies—Japanese Studies, University of Vienna  
<http://kenkyuu.jpn.univie.ac.at/karikaturen/detail.asp?docid=38&lang=e&first=1> I am grateful to Kiseido for alerting me to this reference and for other help.

(4) Dr. Golub noted that even Kuniyoshi, famous artist of traditional subjects, had a modernistic and progressive streak that included an attempt to introduce Western perspective and chiaroscuro, although it apparently was not popular. In addition to portraying surrealism he created things like composite prints (similar to Arcimbaldo), in which, for example, an image of a face is composed of small images of human bodies.

(5) See, for example, Mizuguchi Fujio's catalogue of a 1997 exhibition of go ukiyo-e in the Hiraki Ukiyore Art Museum.