

Psychoanalytical Observations of Japanese Ukiyo-e Mother-Child-Relations Past and Present

Osamu KITAYAMA, Tokyo, Japan

I. INTRODUCTION

In Ukiyo-e, or pictures of the floating world, we can observe various types of human relations, and every piece is interesting as a material which tells the daily lives of people in the Edo period (1600-1867). In the variety of those pictures, the reason why we are particularly interested in the theme of mother-child relationship is obvious. First, psychoanalysis, which is my specialty, puts emphasis on the past, that is, experiences in childhood, as determinants of our mind. As psychoanalytic therapy proceeds, the topic of the dialogue often goes down to the problem of the past history and then deeper down to its origin so as to help us to solve it. This is why psychoanalysis has held its theoretical position that the present is a repetition of the past, just as Japanese proverbs go "The soul of a three-year child continues to 100 years old" and "Sparrows never forget to dance until they are 100 years old." These proverbs could be translated in English as "What is learned in the cradle is carried to the grave" or "The child is father of the man."

Thus, the analytic therapist is expected to study the theories of psychological development as a model to analyze the past. It would be quite beneficial for psychoanalytic training and practice if the typical past of ordinary people, that is, psychological development in childhood, is clarified and formulated in proper language. At the same time, some people are interested in the direct observation of babies and mothers. The scientific techniques for observing mother-child relationship have been considerably advanced by scholars. The important issue, however, is not only to observe mother-child relationship from outside but to try to understand how the child himself or herself experiences it.

Besides, our narrative past is greatly influenced by the way we now recall and tell it in the present cultural situation. Infancy is influenced by the way of child-rearing, and the "recalled past" is naturally influenced by the culture. Both language and child rearing subtly or greatly differ depending on the culture one belongs to. This is why I became interested in studying paintings of infants and children as a possible clue to examine how we tend to recall things from the past, learning how our artists visually describe our childhood.

So, I'd like to show Ukiyo-e, a huge collection of Japanese paintings produced about 200 years ago. Before examining each of them, let me explain briefly about Ukiyo-e itself. Although some of them are hand paintings, we can see their original beauty best in wood block prints. The main themes of the pictures also include scenes from theatrical play and portraits of beautiful women, actors, and Sumo -wrestlers. Some of them are historical scenes, flowers, birds and scenery. Also, there is a group of pictures called "Syun-ga" which describes a variety of sexual

activities between men and women. This type of pictures were prohibited to publish openly until some decades ago.

Most of the pictures I show you today are usually called "Bijin-ga," or pictures of beautiful women, but you also find children accompanied by women. It was not until I had a look at the picture book entitled "Children in the pictures of floating world," published in 1993, that I noticed the existence of those children in "Bijin-ga." I suppose most people were so eager to look at beautiful women that we didn't have enough room to pay scientific attention to the mother-child relationship in these pictures.

II. VIEWING TOGETHER

I have so far investigated nearly 15,000 copies of Ukiyo-e and discovered that the number of pictures in which a child was painted was approximately 500, and of those, that of a mother-child relationship was about 370. Through classifying these pictures, I realized that there were several patterns of the mother-child relationship which repeatedly appeared.

Here, let me take a look at a typical Ukiyo-e print portraying a mother and child. They are playing together with a toy windmill. What I noticed was that these pictures repeatedly appear with mother and child viewing the same object just like the mother and child in this picture. Besides, the same posture was also repeated in pictures consisting of adult characters too. Thus, I came to have an interest in this posture as it conveys an emotionally significant relationship, and I named the figure of more than two persons viewing the same object as "viewing together".

My first interest is the fact that it spreads out or opens a dual relationship. In psychoanalysis, the process of separation of a strongly-bound mother and child has aroused our interests enormously. According to the discussion of transitional objects by D. W. Winnicott(1953), a pediatrician and child-psychanalyst in England, an object such as a blanket plays an important role as a medium of illusion in the process of mother-child separation. We can now broadly redefine this transitional object, which mediates the dual relationship and facilitates the opening of the exclusive relationship of mother and infant.

Before examining the contents of Ukiyo-e in detail, we have to answer the question whether we can treat the mother and child relationship described in Ukiyo-e as proper research material(by Utamaro, the mother is helping the boy to urinate). First, the purpose of producing these works was not to describe the mother-child relationship but to describe mainly beautiful women. It is a feature of these pictures that the women painted as mother were always young and pretty, sometimes erotic and partially naked, that is pornographic to some people. Besides the relative absence of girls may show sex discrimination. And in those pictures father figures are absent. The fact that buyers, sellers and artists were all men distorted the content of pictures and therefore virtually almost all of the child characters were boys, with whom men identified themselves, and that the parental figures were painted as mothers whom babies want to see.

III. RESEARCH RESULT

(1) Classification

Bearing in mind those artificial distortions, when classifying the mother-child relationship described in these pictures, I tried to be careful about the sexual meaning. And, I paid more attention to visible things such as objects which mediate the adult woman and child as well as the distance and the posture between the two. The eight categories I used in classification are as follows:

- Coherence
- "Viewing together" with body contact
- "Viewing together" without body contact
- Face to face
- Parallel
- Support
- No relationship
- Others

Although you may grasp the meaning of this classification by looking at the names above, let me supplement with some explanations. "Coherence" is the case when mother and child physically merge. "Support" is when the woman supports an infant who plays with an object. In this picture, the object is a cat and we can call this a variation of "Viewing together" because this woman physically shares the cat with the child. In a "Parallel" relationship, the mother works with one object while the child plays with another object in parallel. This parallel relationship may imply a psychological connection which could also be a developmental variation of "Viewing together." In this picture (by Tamagawa Shucho), it is clearly expressed when the child plays with rice powder and the mother makes dumplings from it while they sit in "Parallel." The child works with powder and the mother works with dumplings; and both are members of the same family.

Based on this classification, I conducted a survey of 350 Ukiyo-e prints portraying the mother-child relationship. The result was that the percentage of the appearance of what I call "Viewing together" was more than 30%. If we add "Parallel" and "Support" to this, we can say that approximately half of the mothers and children in these pictures have relationships through a certain medium of a bridging object(s) in terms of "Viewing together". This ratio is quite high.

(2) Emotional Transience

Next, I'd like to discuss an emotional characteristic of the objects which the mother and the child view together. There often appeared objects which may be described by expressions such as "floating away", "transient" or "unstable and uncertain." Concrete examples are a hazy moon like this, a swaying fish, cherry-blossoms symbolizing short lives, faces reflected on the water, and fireflies lighting and dimming. These objects are likely to appear quickly and fade away soon. They are not only Fort/Da but also Da/Fort, and their state of going on and off,

appearing and disappearing, conveys a sense of transience (Kitayama 1998). The snow rabbit is sure to melt and disappear as time goes by.

This (by Suzuki Harusige) is an excellent piece. The artist precisely seized the moment when the object is about to disappear. The important point is that the soap bubble is blurred and we can see the empty space after the bubble disappears. The sense of transience is the important meaning of the disappearing bubble in this picture.

Although transition and transience go together quite often, psychoanalysts usually discuss transition rather than transience. Winnicott, in his discussion (1956) of transitional objects wrote, "Its fate is to be gradually allowed to be de-cathexed, so that in the course of years it becomes not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo... It is not forgotten and it is not mourned. It loses meaning..." (p.5). He, I think, was describing the feeling of transience as well as transitional movement.

Those which I mean here by "transition" and "transience" in English are different concepts in everyday language in Japan, as "hakanai" (adj.) or "hakanasa" (n.), which we usually think to be equivalent to "transient" or "transience," clearly means emotions and sentiment referring to "mortality; transiency; evanescence; emptiness; frailty" (NEW JAPANESE-ENGLISH DICTIONARY, Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1954, p.371).

If I may simplify matters, these objects are transitional in space, and transient in time. I want to differentiate them clearly for transition is phenomenological description of movement while transience is mainly an emotional state although they usually go together. I think that if it is mourned, the transitional object becomes emotionally transient rather than just transitional. In my opinion, transition can be just joyful but it is often accompanied with a sense of transience or transiency which is more or less painful sentiment sometimes involving even an artistic sense of beauty as well as senses of sadness, emptiness and depression.

In passing a Japanese word *Arigatou*, which is almost equivalent to "thank you" in English, literally means "difficult to exist," so it is extremely important to appreciate the transience of things. In Japan there is a concept of *Monono-Aware* which is a literal and aesthetic ideal in Japan and which, at its core, refers to "a deep, empathetic appreciation of the ephemeral beauty manifest in nature and human life, and it is therefore usually tinged with a hint of sadness; under certain circumstances it can be accompanied by admiration, awe, or even joy" (Japan: An Illustrated Dictionary, Tokyo: Kodansha, 1993, p.1002).

So I have to quote Sigmund Freud in his well-known essay "*Vergänglichkeit* (On transience)" (1916) here. He wrote, "*Aber ich bestritt dem pessimistischen Dichter, daß die Vergänglichkeit des Schönen eine Entwertung desselben mit sich bringe. Im Gegenteil, eine Wertsteigerung!*" (Freud, 1916). (I did dispute the pessimistic poet's view that the transience of what is beautiful involves any loss in its worth. On the contrary, an increase in worth!) (p.305). We, West and East, are meeting here in terms of transient beauty.

(3) Two Ways of Communication

Furthermore we have found two types of communications in the "Viewing Together." The first category of communication we see between them is a verbal one and this concerns the linguistic use of symbols. In the area of language acquisition, developmental psychologists emphasize the transition from mutually shared experience between mother and child to the use of language. From this point of view, J. Brunner (1975,1995) stressed the importance of "joint attention." The child follows mother's eyes and looks at what the mother is looking, and vice versa. As you can see even in this case of frightened child, the united mother and child may be talking about the same object to which they are paying attention together. It makes us feel as if we can hear their voices when we look at the picture. This very primitive triangle relationship, formed by mother, child, and object, becomes the foundation to discover, share, and use the symbol, which will be repeated countless times throughout life.

The second type of communication is a non-verbal one, that is, an emotional communication often accompanied by a bodily contact. As the classification of "Parallel" indicates, it is important that the two people are viewing an object side by side, with their shoulders abreast, not staring at each other. I have found that people tend to feel emotions such as warmth, trust, joy, fear, hopefulness, sadness and transience which they communicate in such a side-by-side position.

Yoko Yamada (1987), a Japanese developmental psychologist, calls this kind of human, or mother-child, relationship as "abreast relationship." She found that we tend to remember our mother-child relationship like this illustration drawn by one of her girl students. The popularity of side-by-side relationships has been also pointed out with regard to Japanese human relationships often shown in movies directed by Yasujiro Ozu, a Japanese great movie director. This elderly couple in the plate is viewing the sea(taken from "Tokyo Story"), while the lady is going to die as the story develops although they do not know it yet.

This is my favorite. The couple of a mother and child is staring at a hole of an umbrella, but what is more important is the emotional relationship with a bodily contact between the two people, painted in the center, viewing the hole together rather than the seemingly meaningless hole. We do not know whether the child is talking or not, and we are not sure what the child is looking at. But we see here the rich non-verbal communication, which is emotional and bodily. So, what do you feel they communicate non-verbally?

Endo, my colleague psychologist, has suggested to me that intra-dyadic communication is more important than extra-dyadic communication in Japanese nursing couples. The latter, extra-dyadic communication refers to the verbal communication in which they talk about a third object outside the dyad while the former, intra-dyadic communication, mainly refers to the non-verbal emotional one, which is sometimes bodily communication in which they communicate warmth, safety, interest, sadness and transience too.

So I would like to show you many more examples of “viewing together” in other artistic categories outside Ukiyo-e. Uemura Shoen(1875-1949) had made complete replicas, seemingly unconsciously, as she was not only a female painter but also a mother. In one picture we cannot see what they are looking at while the bond of intra-dyadic communication in it is a central figure.

IV. COMPARISON

(1) Figures of the Holy Mother and Child

In Western art, mainly in Italy, we can find much more figures of the Holy Mother and Child than those of an ordinary mother and child which Western painters somehow did not draw. Although we can't make a precise comparison since Western art doesn't have a genre of Ukiyo-e, the mother and child mediated by some objects is seldom produced and the ratio of its appearance in my samples is approximately 5%. In this relatively rare picture (by Leonardo da Vinci), they are sharing little flowers. In many cases of the Holy Mother and Child, the two don't seem to share real, visible objects, but they appear to share something more eternal or absolute, that is the land of God.

Besides, it is notable that they are already separated and have begun to live individually. The baby in those picture, as you know, almost always looks strong and very independent.

I, however, have found many examples of interdependency and emotional and bodily communication in Christian reliefs and sculptures maybe because of their merging nature of mediums. These pictures have been taken from a book, published in Germany, “Madonna und Kind: Das haeusliche Andachtsbild im Florenz des 15. Jahrhunderts” (R.G.Kecks, 1997). Here the mother and child are sharing the same world. The baby or the child in reliefs looks more emotional and dependent on the mother. I think that as artists or craftsmen have to create two characters from one piece of medium, psychology of Amae(Takeo Doi), that is, a Japanese concept of dependency, or mutuality between them is naturally induced in their works because of this oneness of the medium. The concept of Amae roughly refers to “needs to be loved” or dependency need, which is accepted more in Asia than in West where you tend to think that dependency is a sign of weakness or pathology so that this is usually suppressed.

(2) Individual Experiences

It is said that most of the works in Western art have been produced to achieve eternal value, probably because of the fear of transience, but I have found some pictures in Western art that do contain transience in their themes.

For instance, J.-B. Simeon Chardin, a French painter in the 18th century, found values and beauty in materials and foods in daily life rather than in invisible worlds or abstract and metaphysical ideas. Appreciating his picture of a boy playing with a soap bubble, it seems that he is experiencing the object by himself, not clearly shared with someone. And he looks very lonely.

In his another work which also shows a soap bubble as a theme, an infant is playing with a soap bubble using the water while a woman is doing laundry, looking away or watching out. So, I see this child here is experiencing maybe a sense of transience, an emotion of loneliness and a dependency on his own.

(3) Clinical Tragedy

You may say that the dependency or interdependency is too idealized in Japan. As a psychiatrist I must say you are right as far as this may cause us tragic disillusionment from any idealized interdependency, and traumatic maternal deprivation, as we see many clinical cases which are fairly similar to your cases in which you are suffering from any sudden loss of love object. That is why we are learning a lot from psychoanalysis you have developed.

Furthermore we have many clinical cases of "primal scenes" while some Japanese children also suffer from complicated involvement with the parental sexual intercourses. In Japan, there also exist numerous woodcut prints called *Shun-ga*, which portray comically a variety of sexual activities of adults. As we usually sleep in the same room, those pictures, which are full of exaggerations, testify the existence of some children's sexual involvement. It is only psychoanalysts who can detect and prove its pathological possibilities in infancy which are usually suppressed and artistically denied sometimes with laughter. I am sure he is showing surprise and maybe mockery.

V. CONCLUSION

It is suggested to me that particularly a sense of transience and dependency needs are being experienced individually in West while they are "consensually validated" in Japan. Here seems to be a relative difference between West and East.

But I have found one German artist who is very exceptional at this very important point. Casper David Friedrich(1774-1840) made the famous works which I had been looking for and found at last. We could enjoy here the sharp sense of transience and even beauty of loss shared in a shoulder-to-shoulder relationship although you sometimes have to be all alone.

The Ukiyo-e pictures show how the sophisticated sense of emotional transience develops into our cultural entertainment. By having gone through an illusory tie with mother and its consequent disillusionment, we now can appreciate cherry blossoms, enjoy moon-viewing, snow-viewing, and often view objects appearing and disappearing, and fireworks together with others. Even here in the middle, we find a child and a mother figure supporting him. Through these pictorial experiences, we can learn a sense of mortality and enjoy the transience of life.

In the end, if I were to inquire the today's significance of this study, I will answer firstly that it would be beneficial for mutual understanding. Whether we like it or not, as far as we live in a certain culture, I believe that these cultural factors have an influence on goals and processes in our everyday life as well as clinical practice.

It seems to me that even the rabbits viewing together the moon in this picture are appreciating the theme of transience as well as warmth, maybe friendship. From my clinical experiences, I can say the therapist and patient in analytic therapy often start working together to grasp this mature sense of transience towards and through the termination phase, like we here are all together watching and enjoying those beautiful pictures coming here and going away now.

Lastly I would like to show you a few Japanese picture-postcards in which I am now interested.

[REFERENCES]

- Bruner, J. (1975). The capacity for joint visual attention in the infant. *Nature*, 253, 265-266.
- ----- (1995). From joint attention to the meeting of minds: an introduction. In *Joint Attention: Its Origins and Role in Development*, ed. C. Moore & P. J. Dunham. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp.1-14.
- Doi, T. (1973). *The Anatomy of Dependence*. Tokyo: Kodansha.
- Freud, S. (1916). On Transience. *S. E.* 14.
- Kitayama, O.: Transience: its beauty and danger. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, vol.79, part 5, pp. 937-950 (1998).
- Kitayama, O.: Prohibition and transience. In: *Mankind's Oedipal Destiny*, ed. P. Harrtocolis. Madison: International Universities Press, pp. 251-269 (2000).
- Kitayama, O.: Japanese mothers and children in pictures of the floating world; sharing the theme of transience. In: *Psychoanalysis and Art*, eds. E. Blum, H. Blum, & J. Amati-Mehler. Madison: International Universities Press, pp.289-299 (2003).
- Kumon Children's Research Institute (1993). *Children in Pictures of the Floating World*. Osaka: Kumon Institute of Education.
- Yamada, Y. (1987). *Kotobanomaeno Kotoba*. Tokyo: Shin-yosha.
- Winnicott, D. (1953). Transitional objects and transitional phenomena. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 34, 89-97.