

Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Netherlandish Proverbs* and Similar Proverbs in Traditional Japanese Art*

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This paper will discuss how proverbs from Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Netherlandish Proverbs* of 1559 (fig. 1) are surprisingly related to Japanese proverbs in traditional art, especially in the Edo Period (1600–1867).¹ Even though in most cases the phrasing of Dutch and Japanese proverbs differs, there are a few proverbs which bear almost the same phrasing in both languages.



Fig. 1: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 'Netherlandish Proverbs' (1559); Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie (Berlin)

First of all, it is worth mentioning how proverb books became popular before and after Bruegel's time. In Northern Europe from the end of the fifteenth century and throughout the sixteenth century, proverbs played an important role in both public and private lives, and they were used for pronouncing sentences at court, in giving speeches in parliamentary sessions and sermons in churches. As Walter S. Gibson describes, "proverbs, as generally acknowledged repositories of wisdom and as ornaments of rhetorical persuasion, have long been quoted much as modern preachers quote scripture" (2010:6).

The earliest printed proverb publication is the Dutch-Latin book, *Proverbia Communia*, constituting a collection of 803 vernacular proverbs (Jente, 1947). This book appeared in Deventer from 1480 as a textbook for children learning at the Latin school there. Erasmus studied there too. Erasmus' *Adagiorum Collectanea* was first published in 1500 in Paris with 818 proverbs. After several versions, it finally collected 4,251 proverbs in the year of Erasmus' death, 1536.² Many intellectuals all over Europe were stimulated by Erasmus' enlarged publications and they translated Erasmus' *Adages* or compiled vernacular proverbs into their own languages in Antwerp, Kempen, Mechelen, Paris, Rouen, London and other cities.

On the other hand from the first half of the sixteenth century, visualized proverbs especially appeared in paintings, engravings and sculptures, and they became very popular in parallel with the written world of proverbs mentioned above. This is why I refer to the sixteenth century as the "Golden Age of Proverbs." The pictorial tradition of proverbs continued until the second half of the seventeenth century in the Low Countries. Therefore, Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* can be valued as the high point of the Golden Age for the pictorial world, in juxtaposition to Erasmus's *Adages* for the written world.

Bruegel depicts in his *Netherlandish Proverbs* nearly 100 proverbs in a single composition. Although the majority of people in this painting are peasants, also included are people of all classes and occupations in his time, such as a young prince, a rich landlord, two monks, a knight, soldiers, a craftsman, old and young housewives, a fool, and even a criminal on the pillory and two devils. In other words, this painting illustrates the universal world of human behavior; that is, the deception, folly, failure, abuse and weakness found in any human society (Mori, 1992). An anonymous engraving dated from the second half of the sixteenth century may explain Bruegel's intention with the following inscription: "Look here how the world is entirely wrong / I mean the proverbs from which one learns / How things are going in the world / With people from all classes" ('Siet hier de weirelt gansch verkeert / Ick meyne spreucken daer men leert. / Hoe't inde weirelt ommeget / Bij't volck van alderhande staet') (Mori, 2008:25 fig. 5).³

Proverbs are carved in misericords (sculptures in choir stalls) in Flemish and Walloon cities such as Hoogstraten, Diest, Aarschot, Walcours and also in Dutch cities such as Amsterdam, Kempen and Bolsward. Among 54 misericords in Sint-Katherinakerk in Hoogstraten near Antwerp, 9 are identified as those painted by Bruegel. As Bruegel's master, Pieter Coeck van Aalst, designed the stained glass in this church, Bruegel might have visited there and been impressed by the proverb misericords.

The most important previous proverb image prior to Bruegel's painting is *The Blue Cloak* ('De Blauw Huyck') designed, engraved and etched by Frans Hogenberg around 1558 (fig. 2). The inscription written above reads: "This is generally called the Blue Cloak, but would be more appropriate to be called the world's follies" ('DIE BLAV HVICKE IS DIT MEEST GHENAEMT MAER DES WEERELTS ABVISEN HË BETER BETAEMPT').

Among the 43 proverbs in *The Blue Cloak*, 32 are common to Bruegel's proverb painting. It can be assumed that Bruegel was inspired by Hogenberg's composition al-

though Bruegel depicted about 100 proverbs in his painting. In fact, people named proverb prints or paintings "Blue Cloak," as proved by Christoph Plantin's business diary dated 1558 when he sold 3 prints of "De Blauwe Huyck" to the bookseller, Martin II in Paris (Delen, 1969 [1924–1935]:156).



Fig. 2:

Frans Hogenberg, 'The Blue Cloak' (ca. 1558); Bibliothèque royale de Belgique (Brussels)

After Hogenberg's proverb print was published, many "Blue Cloak" prints were produced such as those by Johannes van Doetecum, Theodor Galle, Johannes Galle and several anonymous engravers prior to an early seventeenth century print by Franciscus van Hoeye. The latter carries 69 proverb images with Dutch proverbs (Lebeer, 1939–1940). The most striking proverb painting was executed by Sebastiaan Vrancx in the early seventeenth century, containing 202 proverbs among which Bruegel's 53 proverbs are found. Vrancx's work has been characterized as a truly encyclopedic world of the time (Grauls, 1960).

During the Edo Period in Japan (1600–1867), especially from the second half of the eighteenth century, the intellectual middle class bore an increasing interest in proverb collections as well as their visualizations. At the same time the publication culture came into vogue and proverb collections caused editors to illustrate them for amusement and for decorative tools to all kind of genres like *Gengaen* ('Illustrated Proverb Book') of 1808 (fig. 3) by Kuwagata Keisai.⁴ In addition, the Edo Period produced the 6.5 m long picture scroll by Kō Ryūko († 1858) (fig. 4), accompanied by the Chinese poems by Ōkuni Takamasa. In Japan there is no equivalent monumental proverb painting like Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*; however, this rare picture scroll with 48 al-

phabetical proverbs can be compared to Bruegel's work in that it expresses both the artist's concept as well as his intellectual patron's interest in proverbs.



Fig. 3: Kuwagata Keisai, 'Gengae' (1808; detail); Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku (Tokyo)



Fig. 4: Kō Ryūko, 'Alphabetical Proverbs' (before 1858; detail); Meiji Daigaku (Tokyo)

We may note as well the great vogue of alphabetical proverb playing cards such as *Fifty Proverbs Playing Cards* by Utagawa Kuniyoshi of the mid Edo Period and numerous publications of 48 *Iroha* ('alphabetical') proverb cards. The latter sets consist of image and text cards which were made also for children's games, both for educational purposes as well as for entertainment. The first Japanese playing cards made around the end of the sixteenth century may have been inspired by those brought by Portuguese merchants into Japan.

In addition to these examples, it is remarkable that numerous proverbial visualizations were produced on all kinds of items such as stone gardens like Ryōanji Garden, carvings in the frieze of Shinto temples, tsuba of swords, clothes, the back of mirrors, helmets, tea ceremony vessels, signboards, interior decorations over sliding doors, and so forth. Tokita Masamizu, proverb scholar and collector of visualized proverbs, estimates 300–400 genres.⁵ Japanese folk seem to have considered visualized proverbs as value-added decorations of popular wisdom.

J.F. van Overmeer Fisscher served as the first secretary of the Dutch Trading House in Nagasaki in 1820 and described how the Japanese enjoyed the proverb card games as a form of domestic entertainment (1833:202). Indeed, the Edo Period can also be named as the Golden Age of proverbial representations in Japanese art. Jippensha Ikku explained the proverb culture in his book in short: "Proverbs serve as a sweet medicine to awake sleepy people. [...] Adding short comic poems and illustrations to popular proverbs I could give some pleasure to women and children looking at them" (1986 [1828]:n.p.).

The following ten Flemish proverb images from Bruegel's painting can also be compared to similar Japanese visualized proverbs.

Bruegel's proverb, *She can bind the devil on the pillow* ('Zij zou de duivel op het kussen binden') (fig. 5) ironically demonstrates how a Flemish housewife dominates at home and overwhelms her husband, showing she is stronger than a devil who is wounded by her violence.

An equivalent Japanese image is *A Married Couple of Fleas* by Utagawa Yoshiume in the late Edo Period (fig. 6). Yoshiume depicts a caricaturized couple, namely, the big and tall wife and her small and weak husband as the real difference between a big female and a small male flea. The text says in short: A woman complains about the irresponsible behavior of her husband going out always all the daylong so that she is afraid he might meet by chance debt collectors on the street. In comparison with Bruegel's couple, here Japanese onlookers first laughed at such an unusual married couple, and then sympathized with an obedient husband (Tokita, 2005:32–33 & 253).

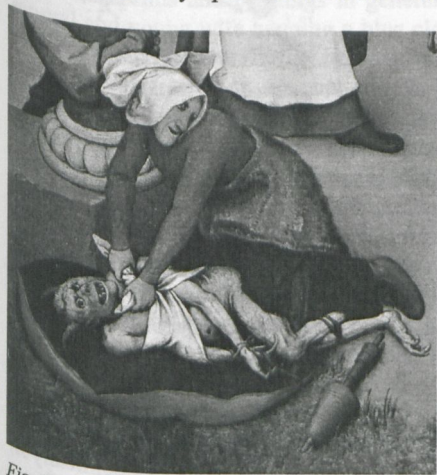


Fig. 5:

Bruegel, "She can bind the devil on the pillow" (detail, fig. 1)



Fig. 6:

Utagawa Yoshiume, 'A Married Couple of Fleas' (late Edo Period; detail); Meiji Daigaku (Tokyo)

Bruegel's *A pillar biter* ('De pilaarbijter') (fig. 7) depicts a man biting a church pillar. This represents hypocritical or fanatical prayers although a pillar has nothing to do with Christian beliefs. The misericord in Hoogstraten more ironically shows a fanatic

monk biting a pillar. In front of him a female head, probably a nun, is anxiously peeping so that the monk pretends to be pious in spite of his deep interest in her.

The similar Japanese proverb by Toba School is, *Faith makes one worship even the sardine's head* (fig. 8) which is known in English as, *Believe well and have well*. Like the monk in the misericord mentioned above, a Japanese Buddhist priest prays with his rosary to a sardine. For humor, his body is composed of the letters of this proverb written in reed-like letters. The sardine remains even at present as one of the most inexpensive fish in Japan, yet this fish was used as fertilizer in the Edo Period. However, according to a superstition its head was believed to contain a magic power.



Fig. 7: Bruegel, "A pillar biter" (detail, fig. 1)



Fig. 8: Toba School, "Faith makes one worship even the sardine's head" (1720)

Bruegel's grotesque-looking man with double mouths appears from a small opening of the wall representing a proverb, *He speaks from the double mouth* ('Hij spreekt uit twee monden') (fig. 9). The proverb may be related to the passage in Timothy I, 3:8 of the New Testament: "Likewise must the deacons be grave, not double tongued, not given too much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre." Anna Bijns (1493–1575), Bruegel's contemporary poet, quotes this proverb in her poetic refrain of 1524 as follows: "Everyone is now inclined to trap the other. He speaks by two mouths and it is very clear" (Marijnissen, 1988:136).

The image of the Japanese proverb of 1868 is surprisingly close to Bruegel's. It was illustrated by Utagawa Utashige (Hiroshige III), and it reads, *He speaks by two tongues* (fig. 10), namely, he is a liar and an unfaithful person. Utashige comically illustrates the proverb with a sitting man showing two long tongues. He looks like a merchant because while rubbing his hands together he wants to boast of merchandise to his clients with his cunning tongue in spite of its inferior quality.



Fig. 9: Bruegel, "He speaks from the double mouth" (detail, fig. 1)



Fig. 10: Utagawa Utashige (Hiroshige III), "He speaks by two tongues" (1868; detail); Meiji Daigaku (Tokyo)

Bruegel's *She hangs the blue cloak over her husband* ('Zij hangt haar man de blauwe huik om') (fig. 11) is placed in the center of the foreground, and it is a key figure of Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*. For "The Blue Cloak" was the common title of proverb prints and paintings in general as mentioned earlier. The behavior of the sensual and young wife hanging a blue cloak over her old husband palpably indicates the betrayal of his wife. In fact her husband needs a cane to help him walk so that they doubtlessly represent an unequal couple. The literary backgrounds of the color blue and several examples of the proverbial phrase, *to hang a blue cloak* from the sixteenth century have been discussed earlier in my previous work (2004).

A similar Japanese proverb reads, *She covers her husband's face with mud*, and it means a wife brings disgrace upon her husband. The colored woodblock print (fig. 12) after Kawanabe Kyōsai's (1831–1889) depicts this proverb in a much more rough and comical way than the original one, and the colors and design of the wife's kimono have been changed too.⁶ After the husband and his wife have been together, he becomes so tired that he falls asleep on top of the waste box. Yet his young wife is not pleased so that she secretly invites her boyfriend in and hands him her love letter. At the same time, she paints mud on her husband's face to cover his sight. In addition to the proverb inserted in this scene, another humorous sentence was added, namely, "As I will paint you well, stand still!" Thus the duped husband is more caricaturized than Kyōsai's original work.

Bruegel's *One fills the well after the calf has drowned* ('Als 't kalf verdrongen is, dempt men de put') (fig. 13) depicts one of the most characteristic expressions in his *Netherlandish Proverbs*. A careless peasant covers an empty well with dirt after his precious calf has drowned. He is situated almost in the center of the foreground, and his repentant face with his white shirt impresses the viewer with how upset this peasant is after having lost his important property.



Fig. 11: Bruegel, "She hangs the blue cloak over her husband" (detail, fig. 1)



Fig. 12: After Kawanabe Kyōsai, "She covers her husband's face with mud" (after 1868); Kawanabe Kyōsai Memorial Museum (Warabi, Saitama)

Donaes Idinau, a Flemish Jesuit of the seventeenth century made a sermonizing poem as follows: "He fills the well when the calf has drowned; this proverb suits all those who become wise too late. / Use the grace given to you by God: Listen always to his advice. The screaming of the foolish bridesmaids is painful" ('Hy stopt den put als't kalf is verdroncken; Dat past op alle / die te spade wijs zijn. Stelt gratie te wercke / u van Gode gheschoncken: Siet toe in tijds / naer dit aduijs mijn. Der dwase maeghden / doet het ghekrijs pijn') (1606:12).



Fig. 13: Bruegel, "One fills the well after the calf has drowned" (detail, fig. 1)



Fig. 14: "Making a rope after arresting a thief" (mid Edo Period); Tatōe (proverb) playing card

A Japanese corresponding proverb reads, *Making a rope after arresting a thief* (fig. 14). The illustration is one from a pack of 50 proverb playing cards, and it does not give any pessimistic impression like Bruegel's peasant does. A powerful and half-naked man loosely puts his right leg on the back of a thief, as he tries to make a rope to arrest him. His hairs are standing up from rage like the blowing hairs of Bruegel's repentant peasant. The painter provides an opportunity for onlookers to anticipate the next moment when the cunning thief may escape from his strong captor.

Bruegel's *He falls from the ox onto the ass* ('Hij valt van de os op de ezel') (fig. 15) in the sixteenth century implies that one regresses from a higher position to a lower one. In his *Adages*, Erasmus quotes a similar proverb, *From a horse to an ass* ('Ab equis ad asinos'), and he comments: "He turns away from honorable studies to less honorable ones, from a philosopher to a chorister, from a theologian to a grammarian, from a merchant to an inn-keeper" (1961 [1703]:274). This meaning today, however, remains unfamiliar in Belgium.

The other meaning of the proverb is to chatter without consistent content as seen in Bruegel's contemporary *The Blue Cloak* engravings in which citizens jump from the ox to the ass. The latter meaning is more popular among Belgians.

Exactly the opposite proverb exists in Japanese, *He jumps from a cow onto a horse*. It means to change from an inferior to a superior thing or person as illustrated in Kuwagata Keisai's *Gengaen* (1994 [1808]) (fig. 16). This proverb instructs a young one how to adjust his future to a better situation. In Maeda Isamu's *Dictionary of Edo Language* (2003 [1979]), an interesting quotation is cited in *Rice Wine, Seiro, Five Kariganes* in the Edo Period: "You married far above your poor family background, as the proverb says, 'to change from a cow to a horse'" (120).



Fig. 15: Bruegel, "He falls from the ox onto the ass" (detail, fig. 1)



Fig. 16: Kuwagata Keisai, "He jumps from a cow onto a horse," 'Gengaen' (1808; detail); Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku (Tokyo)

Bruegel's *To hold an eel by the tail* ('Een aal bij de staart hebben') (fig. 17) suggests a foolish attempt without any chance of success. It is worth comparing Bruegel's fisherman with those by the engravers, Frans Hogenberg, Anonymous, Johannes van Doetecum and Lucas Fruytiers. They do not represent fishermen, but rather mostly well-dressed citizens who are holding eels by the tails, but they do not appear to lose their eels in the next instance.

Jean de Meung, one of two French authors of *Le roman de la rose* of the thirteenth century admonishes his friend with the proverb about how a woman's heart is changeable so that it is almost impossible to get her heart: "He could hold nothing more than an eel by the tail in the Seine" ('Il ne le pourrait pas plus que s'il tenait, dans la Seine, une anguille par la queue') (Lorris & de Meung, 1992:532–533). The same proverb is quoted by Dutch humanist Johan de Brune in his *The New Wine in the Old Leather Bag* of 1636, as follows: "The person who holds the eel by the tail and trusts a woman's words will certainly complain with regret, 'Everything is just wind and I have nothing now'" ('Die by den steert een palingh houdt, / En op een vrouwes woorden bouwt; / Die magh wel zegghen met verdriet, / 't is al maer wind, ik en hebbe niet') (176).

Thus already from the fourteenth century until the seventeenth century this proverb referred to the loss of a lady's love.

A Japanese proverb, *To catch a catfish with a gourd* seems to be similar to Bruegel's, since an eel, a catfish and a gourd are all slippery, thus implying an impossible attempt. It is found in the famous Japanese festive floats in Nagasaki painted in a picture scroll in the late Edo Period which is called the *Kunchi Festive Procession* (fig. 18).



Fig. 17: Bruegel, "To hold an eel by the tail" (detail, fig. 1)

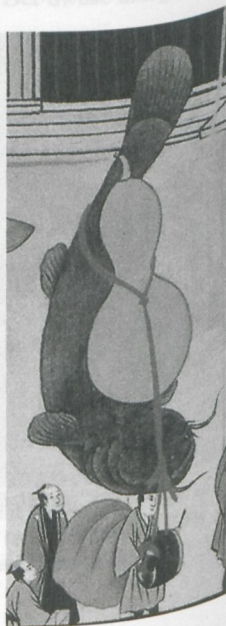


Fig. 18: Watanabe Kakushu and Hirowatari Sakusaburo, "To catch a catfish with a gourd," 'Kunchi Festive Procession' (1800–1812; detail)

The Japanese picture scroll by Taikō Josetsu represents the same proverb (fig. 19), and it is one of the most prominent masterpieces of Medieval Japanese painting. This proverb is well known as a paradoxical question for Buddhist monks as well as laymen in Zen meditation. As Josetsu depicts the proverb in the background of the macrocosmic landscape, onlookers have to find the answer by means of their own metaphysical thoughts, not by means of any real methods.



Fig. 19: Taikō Josetsu, "To catch a catfish with a gourd" (ca. 1410; detail); Myōshinji Temple, Taizoin (Kyoto)

Bruegel's *It is easy to cut straps out of another man's leather* ('Het is goed riemen snijden uit een andermans leer') (fig. 20), depicts using other people's money or property for one's own profit. Bruegel's tanner cuts an unusually wide belt and amazes his apprentice. Symon Andriessoon in his book of 1550 gives several related proverbs, namely, *It is good to cut pipes from someone else's reeds* ('Tis goet pijpen snijden in eens anders riet'), *It is good to ride on someone else's horse* ('Tes goet rijden op eens anders paerdt') and, *It is good to warm oneself with someone else's hearth* ('Tes goet wermen aen eens anders heert') (2003 [1550]:109 & 216).

The illustration by Utagawa Yoshiume (1819–1879), *Wrestling at the Expenses of Another's Loin-Cloth* (fig. 21), is very close to Bruegel's tanner's action. He depicts two sumo wrestlers, a powerful one and a weak one. The powerful wrestler borrows the loincloth belonging to the weak one. As a result he becomes the winner of the contest. Therefore the proverb implies that the poor wrestler is ashamed of his nakedness and at the same time he looks at his companion enviously. The deeper meaning of the proverb is that one likes to borrow funds from his friend in order to get a big profit. He says: "If I lost the speculation, I don't mind because I started as a poor (naked) person. Please lend me funds (loincloth)" (Tokita, 2005:198–199).

Bruegel's *If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch* ('Als de ene blinde de andere leidt, vallen ze beiden in de gracht') (fig. 1 & 25) refers to Mathew, 15:14. He painted three tiny figures of blind men in the background near the sea. They will be safe as far as they walk in the field, but not toward the cliff. However in his lat-

er painting, *The Parable of the Blind* (1568) in Naples (fig. 22), Bruegel underlines the more tragic accident. After the fall of the blind leader into a deep river, his other five companions will soon encounter the same danger.

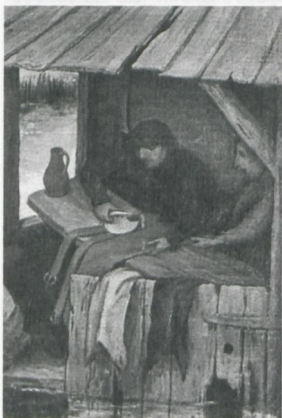


Fig. 20: Bruegel, "It is easy to cut straps out of another man's leather" (detail, fig. 1)



Fig. 21: Utagawa Yoshiume, 'Wrestling at the Expenses of Another's Loin-Cloth' (late Edo Period); Meiji Daigaku (Tokyo)

Anna Bijns, a passionate Catholic poet published refrains in the mid-sixteenth century and warned against the Lutherans: "They are wolves, though they are wearing a sheepskin, they are blind leaders" (1968:48).⁷ A sixteenth century chronicler in Ghent, Marcus van Vaernewijck wrote in his diary (1566–1568) about the religious conflicts between the Catholics and Protestants, and he also described the situation as follows:

"Look how the devil can seed his weeds under the appearance of the false holiness and how he confuses, binds and bewitches the eyes of the reason of our poor blind men and how this coarse and unwieldy devil lets them clearly perceive, but the folk became so foolish that they did not stop to follow him: The blind leads the other blind into the ditch" (1872:218).

Kawanabe Kyōsai's *The Blind Leading the Blind* represents five blind adults and two blind children (fig. 23). The scene is reminiscent of Bruegel's earlier painting. The adults are walking in a rapid stream during the summer. Most of them, even the small child, carry instruments to play for their daily income. Although Kyōsai does not express the immediate danger to the family, he seems to let the viewer anticipate what fate they may encounter in the next instant.

Josiah Conder, architect and Kyōsai's student, reproduces his master's interesting image relating this procession of the blind, *The Procession of Blind Men Led by a White Hare to the Moon* in his book *Paintings and Studies by Kawanabe Kyōsai* (1911) (fig. 24). The blind people are led by a white hare with a mask of Tengu, a high- and long-nosed goblin, meant as an occidental by Kyōsai. Conder interpreted in his book, "the meaning of Kyōsai's lampoon apparently was, that a number of people,

possessed of foreign books which they could not read, were being blindly conducted under foreign leadership to a place of illusion" (1911:123). Kyōsai disliked Japanese superficial intellectuals caught up in the fashion for Western culture without any true knowledge of its value. At the same time, he probably satirizes in the white hare the crazy bubble of speculation in the new varieties of hares from the West which were bred during the early Meiji Era (1872–1874). This phenomenon was similar to the Tulip Mania in 1637 in the Low Countries (Shiroyama, 2011).



Fig. 22: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *'The Parable of the Blind'* (1568); Museo di Capodimonte (Naples)



Fig. 23: Kawanabe Kyōsai, *'The Blind Leading the Blind'* (1881)



Fig. 24: Kawanabe Kyōsai, 'The Procession of Blind Men Led by a White Hare to the Moon' (1881); present location unknown

Bruegel's *Everything, no matter how finely spun, will come finally to the sun* ('Niemand ooit zo klein iets spon, of het kwam wel aan de zon') (fig. 25) is placed at a highly visible position, namely, at the top right because with this proverb he wanted to summarize the most important message. A more direct proverb is found in a French proverb collected in Gabriel Meurier's *Thresor de sentences dorées* (1578), which reads: *No sin can be hidden so well, that it will not finally be revealed* ('Nul péché n'est si celé, qu'en la fin ne soit révélé') (142).

Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, a seventeenth century Bolognese artist illustrates the proverb with the same meaning in his book, *I proverbi figurati* (1678). The title reads: "Notice that God watches you," and the inscription follows: "In a most deserted and remote place, / while you plot to injure a person who is sleeping, / Not only your actions, but your thoughts too are watched by God" (1996 [1678]:11–12) (fig. 26).

This is similar to the verse in Proverbs 15:3: "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good!" Mitelli illustrates the eye in the heavens as watching the attack of a robber against an innocent passenger to warn the viewer that no perfect crime or hidden evil is allowed in a world under the control of God.

The same proverb in Japanese, *Heaven's net is coarse, but catches everything*, means heaven's vengeance is slow but sure. Keisai Eisen's *Heaven's Net* (1844) (fig. 27) surprisingly corresponds to Mitelli's image. The thief threatens the innocent passenger, saying, "Give me money quietly!" The passenger cries, "Help!" The event occurs in front of a Jizō, a guardian deity. Yet he says, "As I am a stone statue, I cannot help him. I feel sorry for him" (Mantei, 2005 [1844]:188–189). However, the stone statue warns the thief that the heavens personified by the sun, moon and wind are watching his evil deeds on earth.



Fig. 25: Bruegel, "Everything, no matter how finely spun, will come finally to the sun" (detail, fig. 1)



Fig. 26: Guiseppe Maria Mitelli, "Notice that God watches you," *I proverbi figurati* (1678)



Fig. 27: Keisai Eisen, 'Heaven's Net' (1844)

This proverb originates from the writing, *Seventy Three Chapters* by the Chinese philosopher, Laotse (604–531), founder of Taoism (Abe & Yamamoto & Ichikawa & Endō, 1966:119–121). Laotse advises that one should not be offensive in either one's conduct or actions and should not emulate others, who do so. He suggests having the courage to stay humble even though one has distinguished oneself in all fields. Otherwise one may destroy both oneself and others. As the proverb says, *Heaven's net is coarse, but catches everything*. It is interesting to compare the philosophical meaning of the proverb by Laotse with the modified one in the Edo Period. In fact the Japanized proverb became more admonishing and understandable to citizens.

In conclusion, the proverb publications in Northern Europe in the sixteenth century are much richer than those in the Edo Period. However, genres of the visualized proverbs in Northern Europe are rather limited to misericords, tapestries, graphic arts, paintings, painted wooden plates and other forms. Yet, it is very characteristic that these examples from the Low Countries, based upon ethical messages from classical philosophy and literature, are more moralistic and didactic than those in Japan. In contrast, Japanese proverb images are found in hundreds of genres. It is also noteworthy to mention that the Japanese pictorial world is less moralistic, because the viewers expected entertainment, humor and laughter from proverb images. Both artists and publishers tried to avoid the tragic connotation of the images even if there were some caricaturized features. Overmeer Fisscher explained this Japanese mentality to Western readers in his book. The following quotation is from the chapter, *Pastime and Entertainment*: "Japanese eagerly use every occasion to please their hearts and keep off all worries and affliction. [...] The remiss of enjoyment is nearly considered neglect of duty" (1833:197).

Notes

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- 1 This paper continues a discussion from the author's previous work (see 2003 & 2008).
 - 2 About the further versions of his *Adagiorum collectanea*, see Phillips (1964).
 - 3 The illustration was reproduced in Lebeer (1939–1940:174).
 - 4 All Japanese names in this paper are provided in traditional Japanese sequence: Family name, followed by given name.
 - 5 The author owes these insights to Tokita Masamizu's rich collection of Japanese visualized proverbs, his publications including *Zusetsu Kotowaza Jiten* (Dictionary of Japanese Illustrated Proverbs) (2008) and his informative suggestions.
 - 6 See Kyōsai's original woodblock of this proverb (Mori, 2003:194 fig. 3).
 - 7 The author cites another passage of Bijns' criticism against the Lutherans (see 2003:203).

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