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The Great Wave Off Kanagawa and The Taiji Diagram

by Benjamin Wai-ming Ng

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1. Introduction

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) was a preeminent Japanese painter of the Edo period (1603–1868) and his influence on the global art world is unparalleled in Japanese art history. The rise of *Japonisme* in nineteenth-century Europe was closely connected to Hokusai, and major artists such as Gustave Courbet (1819–1877), Edouard Manet (1832–1883), Edgar Degas (1834–1917), Claude Monet (1840–1926), and Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) all drew inspiration from his works.^[1] Among Hokusai's many masterpieces, the one that undoubtedly made the greatest impact on the West is *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (*Great Wave*, 1831) from the series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* (Fig. 1).^[2]



Fig. 1: *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*

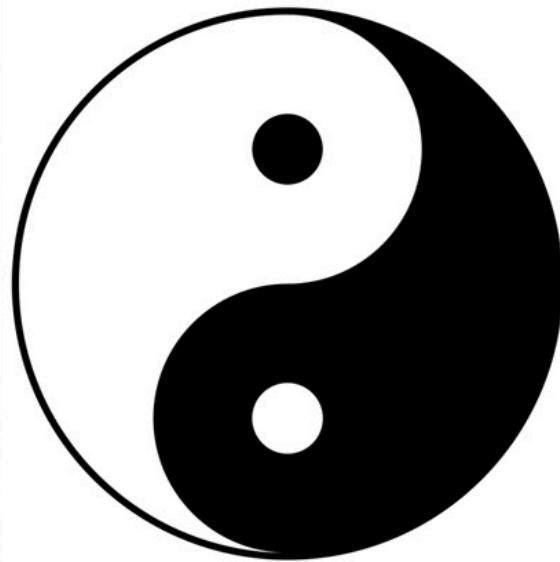
Hokusai is often hailed as “the Leonardo da Vinci of Japan,” a comparison that not only acknowledges his extraordinary artistic achievements, but also suggests that his works frequently contain subtle layers of cultural meaning. [3] Through an analysis of relevant primary sources and artworks, this article examines the hidden cultural symbolism of this world-famous *ukiyo-e* print from a fresh angle—namely, through the interpretive framework of *Yijing* (*Classic of Changes*) principles. It proposes that Hokusai was likely inspired by *Taiji Yin-yang Diagram* (*The Taiji Diagram*) during the creation of *The Great Wave*. In a certain sense, *The Great Wave* can be regarded as an *ukiyo-e* version of *The Taiji Diagram*.

2. The Composition of *The Great Wave*

The Composition of *The Great Wave* aligns strikingly with *The Taiji Diagram* that became popular in China after the Song dynasty. A defining feature of this diagram is the equal division of black and white, representing yin and yang, which swirl together in an S-shaped dynamic to express the Eastern philosophical idea that yin contains yang and yang contains yin (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: An Early Form of *The Taiji Diagram* found in the Ming-dynasty Book *Tushubian*



The composition of *The Great Wave* appears to conceal certain elements of Chinese philosophical symbolism, aligning with *The Taiji Diagram*. In fact, the print contains two layers of *Taiji*-like structure. The first is found in the overall composition of the ukiyo-e. The giant wave and the surrounding space are divided by a reverse S-shaped curve, each occupying half of the image and creating a sense of dynamic balance. [4] The dark, towering wave and the bright, open space correspond respectively to yin and yang. The second is embedded within the structure of the waves themselves. The cyclical rise and fall of the waves resemble the alternation of yin and yang. The dark, high waves represent yin, while the lighter, lower waves represent yang.

Some contemporary Western scholars have suggested that the inspiration for *The Great Wave* may have come from *The Taiji Diagram*. Stefan Helmreich, an anthropology professor at MIT, notes that scholars in Europe and the United States often interpret *The Great Wave* through the lens of yin and yang. [5] Ukiyo-e specialist Jocelyn Bouquillard and Hokusai's expert Takeuchi Takahito, deputy director of The Hokusai Museum in Japan, also see religious and philosophical notions of yin and yang reflected in the print. [6] Art historian Matthew Wilson argues that the high and low waves symbolize *The Taiji Diagram*. He explains this as follows:

Hokusai clearly echoed the mountain's iconic triangular profile in one of the waves—even the colours are similar. At the same time, the circular shape of the top of the wave is echoed by circular trough of the sea beneath it. The two circles, containing two elements—water and air, interlock with each other, as in the ancient Chinese *yin-yang* symbol. [7]

Literary critic Dominic Witek likewise sees in *The Great Wave* a *yin yang* symbol infused with Daoist and Buddhist philosophy, writing:

Have you noticed that the sea and the sky respectively take up half of the work? The swirling wave forms a circle whose center is in the middle of the canvas. Doesn't this remind you of the Yin and Yang? This work would thus be a direct evocation of Taoist and Buddhist principles. In other words, we see a space made of violence and brutality, which contrasts with the peaceful calm of the sky: a metaphor of human duality maybe. [8]

Witek even transformed *The Great Wave* into a black-and-white projection (which he calls 'View of the Principle of Yin and Yang in *The Great Wave* by Hokusai') to demonstrate its resemblance to *The Taiji Diagram* (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Black-and-White Projection of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*

In fact, similar interpretations are quite common in Western literary and art criticism. However, most art historians maintain a certain distance from such claims, since no strong supporting evidence can be found in Hokusai's surviving primary sources, and image-based analysis inevitably carries a degree of subjectivity.

3. Hokusai's Self Explanation

Hokusai left no written commentary on *The Great Wave*, nor did he ever mention *The Taiji Diagram*. However, clues scattered throughout his other works suggest that both his aesthetic vision and the composition of *The Great Wave* were influenced by *The Taiji Diagram*.

Hokusai's artistic philosophy emphasized a natural sense of compositional balance, a spirit that resonates with *The Taiji Diagram*. In his drawing instruction manual, *Ryakuga haya oshie* (Quick Teachings for Rough Drawings, 1812), he expressed a clear preference for S-shaped compositions—forms that closely mirror the symmetrical S-curve characteristic of *The Taiji Diagram*. [9] The S-shape formed by two arcs curving in opposite directions was one of Hokusai's fundamental compositional devices, and his manual contains numerous examples of using this form to depict figures, animals, plants, and

waves (Fig.4). [10] It is therefore no coincidence that *The Great Wave* is constructed around a symmetrical S-shaped composition.



Fig. 4: Examples of S-shaped Composition in the *Ryakuga Haya Oshie*

The strongest internal evidence that *The Great Wave* was inspired by *The Taiji Diagram* comes from one of Hokusai's late works, *Totōzu (The Angry Waves, 1847)* (Fig.5). Hokusai spent three years, from 1845 to 1847, creating this ceiling painting for the festival float of Kanmachi in Obuse in Shinshū. The work consists of two panels—Female Wave (*Menami*) and Male Wave (*Onami*)—and can be read as a kind of self-explanation of *The Great Wave*. The male and female waves correspond closely to the two wave formations in *The Great Wave*, differing mainly in added details that evoke male and female reproductive characteristics, symbolizing the interaction and balance of yin and yang.



Fig. 5: *The Angry Waves* From Left to Right, Female Wave and Male Wave

Both the Female Wave and Male Wave panels of *The Angry Waves* employ an S-shaped composition, with the massive wave and the surrounding space each occupying roughly half of the image—precisely the same structural balance seen in *The Great Wave* and *The Taiji Diagram*. Several Japanese Hokusai

specialists (including Takeuchi Takashi, Suwa Haruo, and Inuma Masaharu) maintain that the use of the S-shaped composition in these two panels symbolizes the harmonious union of yin and yang within the cosmos. [11]

4. Hokusai's Use of *The Classic of Changes*

Hokusai left no written record of formally studying *The Classic of Changes*, yet his mid- and late-career works show that he had a deep understanding of its principles. Concepts such as taiji, *yinyang*, *wuxing* (five agents), the eight trigrams, and the sixty-four hexagrams exerted a strong influence on his art. His two major illustrated compendia—*Hokusai Manga* (1814) and *Banbutsu ehon taizen-zu* (The Illustrated Book of All Things, 1829)—contain numerous works that incorporate ideas from *The Classic of Changes*. [12] For example, in the *Hokusai Manga*, he creatively uses the hexagrams Pi ☱ (Stagnation) and Meng (Ignorance) to describe two different stages from the life of King Wen of Zhou (Fig.6).



Fig. 6: King Wen of Zhou in the *Hokusai Manga*

In addition, Hokusai produced illustrations for the *Onmyō intō no maki* (*The Scroll of Yin-Yang Eroticism*), explaining sexual union through the harmony of yin and yang. The portrait of the author—Kyūshū physician Kudō Ichiyō—featured in the work reflects his understanding of *yin-yang* and his deep grasp of the symbolic meanings embedded in the *Classic of Changes*. (Fig. 7). [13]



Fig. 7: The Portrait of the Author in the *The Scroll of Yin-Yang Eroticism*

In the illustration, Kudō Ichiyō is depicted as a weird figure whose yin and yang are indistinguishable, a being combining both male and female attributes. At the top of the image appear two hexagrams invented by Hokusai, variants of the hexagrams *qian* ☰ and *kun* ☷. By inserting a single yin line into the six yang lines of *qian*, and a single yang line into the six yin lines of *kun*, Hokusai expresses the idea of “yin within yang” and “yang within yin,” which is precisely the core concept of *The Taiji Diagram*. As a matter of fact, many of Hokusai’s works—such as *The Angry Waves* and *Pine Tree and Cranes in Snow* (*Yukimatsu ni Tsuru*)—reflect the balance of *yin-yang*. [14] Given Hokusai’s tendency to incorporate *Changes* principles into his art and his clear understanding of the balance of *yin-yang*, the idea that the design and underlying philosophy of *The Great Wave* were inspired by *The Taiji Diagram* becomes a reasonable and compelling hypothesis.

5. Hints from Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*

Interestingly, *The Great Wave* also appeared as a *yin-yang* symbol in the eyes of the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh. In his later years, Van Gogh loved collecting and copying Edo-period ukiyo-e prints, and Hokusai was among his favorite Japanese artists, whose style left a clear mark on his own work. In *Starry Night* (1889), a large and a small swirling cloud formation appear—shapes that resemble *The Taiji Diagram* even more closely than the waves in *The Great Wave* (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: Swirling Clouds in *Starry Night*

Several Van Gogh specialists, art historians, and artists have suggested that parts of *Starry Night* were inspired by *The Great Wave*. Pop culture scholar Hugh Davies argues that the blue night sky in *Starry Night* was inspired by the blue waves of *The Great Wave*. [15] Van Gogh specialist Martin Bailey also points out numerous similarities between the composition and color choices of *Starry Night* and *The Great Wave*—for example, the swirling clouds resemble towering waves, and the Les Alpilles mountains echo the Mount Fuji in Hokusai’s background. [16] He compares them as follows:

It is likely that he was partly inspired by Hokusai’s *The Great Wave*, a powerful image he greatly admired. Van Gogh vividly wrote that Hokusai’s “waves are claws, and the boat is caught in them, you can feel it.” In the print, the wave towers the volcanic peak of Mount Fuji, whereas in Van Gogh’s painting the swirling mass hurtles towards the more gentle slope of Les Alpilles. Both works share a similar colouring of rich blues and white. [17]

Since Martin Bailey proposed in his 2018 monograph that parts of *Starry Night* were inspired by *The Great Wave*, the idea has generated considerable discussion in the West. Archaeoastronomer Falken Forshaw interprets the swirling clouds in *Starry Night* as a form of *The Taiji Diagram*, writing:

I was very intrigued that both a planetarium was used to analyze the painting as well as the notice of the Yin Yang. I overlayed some straight line connections between celestial objects and the Yin Yang, starting with the painting’s diagonals, which intersect at the bottom of the Yin Yang circle. [18]

Visual artist Greg Saucier goes further, stating directly that Van Gogh, influenced by Japanese art, painted the swirling clouds in *Starry Night* in the form of *The Taiji Diagram*. He writes:

An interesting observation about *Starry Night*, is that the large, swirling cloud mass in the center of the painting has a very strong resemblance to the Oriental Yin & Yang symbol (there's also a smaller one to the right). To illustrate this, I superimposed an electronic overlay of a translucent Yin/Yang over the central cloud mass, as you can see from the resulting modified image above. Since Vincent was influenced by Japanese art, perhaps he included the symbol consciously. But we may never know for sure. [19]

Saucier even went so far as to modify *Starry Night* itself, directly transforming the swirling clouds into *The Taiji Diagram* (Fig. 9). In the digital age, such image alterations have become a trend. On Western internet platforms, countless digitally edited images merge *Starry Night* with *The Great Wave*, further spreading Bailey's interpretation. (Fig. 10)



Fig. 9: *Starry Night* Modified by Saucier



Fig. 10: An Example of Computer Generated Artwork
Merging *Starry Night* with *The Great Wave*

6. Concluding Remarks

Entering the twenty-first century, some Western art critics and online commentators began suggesting that Hokusai may have been inspired by *The Taiji Diagram* when creating *The Great Wave*. However, these remarks have largely remained scattered, impressionistic, and lacking systematic analysis. As a result, this idea has not been taken seriously within mainstream academia. The present article is the first attempt to offer a structured argument for the possible relationship between *The Great Wave* and *The Taiji Diagram*.

Since Hokusai himself left no direct explanation of *The Great Wave*, nor any written reference to *The Taiji Diagram*, the arguments presented here are necessarily circumstantial. Such circumstantial evidence falls into two categories: internal and external. Internal evidence includes analyzing the composition of *The Great Wave* for its similarities to *The Taiji Diagram*, examining Hokusai's aesthetic principles and other works, and considering his tendency to incorporate concepts of *The Classic of Changes* into his art. External evidence consists of the views of Hokusai scholars and the insights drawn from Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. Taken together, this study shows that the idea of *The Great Wave* being inspired by *The Taiji Diagram* is not baseless. Rather, it is a perspective supported by multiple strands of circumstantial

evidence—one that merits further scholarly attention and deeper investigation.

Footnotes:

1. Mabuchi Akiko, *Hokusai and Japonisme* (Tokyo: The National Museum of Western Art, 2017) and Inaga Shigemi, “The Making of Hokusai’s Reputation in the Context of Japonisme,” *Japan Review*, 15 (2003): 77–100.
2. Gustave Courbet’s *The Wave* (1869), Gustave–Henri Jossot’s *The Wave* (1894), Claude Debussy’s *La Mer* (The Sea, 1905) and Andy Warhol’s *Waves* (*After Hokusai*) (1985) all pay tribute to *The Great Wave*. For discussions of the significance of this work in global art history, see Christine Guth, *Hokusai’s Great Wave: Biography of a Global Icon* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015) and Timothy Clark, *Hokusai’s Great Wave* (London: British Museum Press, 2011).
3. Nagata Seiji, the curator of The Hokusai Museum, expressed the view that many people call Hokusai “the Leonardo da Vinci of Japan.” See Seiji Nagata and Kotobuki Shiriagari, “Hokusai in Full View Berlin 2011,” *Web Magazine Wochi Kochi* (1 October 2011) (<https://www.wochikochi.jp/english/topstory/2011/10/hokusai-berlin.php>) (<https://www.wochikochi.jp/english/topstory/2011/10/hokusai-berlin.php>). Some Japanese Hokusai specialists have attempted to decipher the hidden meanings embedded in his prints. See Arai Tsutomu: *Hokusai no kakushi e* (Hidden Paintings of Hokusai) (Tokyo: Kido shuppan, 1989) and Nishizawa Hiroko, *Hokusai: Uchū o dezain su* (Hokusai: Designing the Universe) (Toda: Nōzan gyoson bunka kyōkai, 2006).
4. This balance between the great wave and the surrounding space beneath Mount Fuji can also be seen in another of Hokusai’s ukiyo-e prints, *Kaijō no Fuji* (*Fuji at Sea*, 1834), included in Katsushika Hokusai: *Fugaku hyakkei ni-hen* (*One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, Volume 2) (Kyoto: Geisōdō shuppanbu, 1948), p. 10. *Kaijō no Fuji* may be regarded as a mirror image of *The Great Wave*; when flipped horizontally, its basic composition closely resembles that of *The Great Wave*.
5. Stefan Helmreich, *A Book of Waves* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), chapter 3, pp. 159–210.
6. Jocelyn Bouquillard, translated by Mark Getle, *Hokusai’s Mount Fuji: The Complete Views in Color* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2007), p. 14; Takeuchi Takahito, “Kanagawaoki namiura o koeta Obuse matsuri yatai tenjōga wa chūshōga e no michi,” (The Ceiling Painting on the Obuse Festival Float, Surpassing *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, is a Step towards Abstract Art), *Zaidanhōjin Hokusai-kan Hokusai kenkyūjo kenkyū kiyō*, Vol. 8 (February 2016): 8–28.
7. Matthew Wilson, *Art Unpacked: 50 Works of Art: Uncovered, Explored, Explained* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2023), p. 154.
8. Dominic Witek, “Understanding Hokusai’s *The Great Wave*,” *Artsper’s*

Magazine, 12 March 2022 (<https://blog.artsper.com/en/a-closer-look/understanding-hokusais-the-great-wave> (<https://blog.artsper.com/en/a-closer-look/understanding-hokusais-the-great-wave>)).

9. Nakamura Hideki, *Hokusai mangekyō* (Hokuai's Kaleidoscope) (Tokyo: Bijutsu shuppansha, 1990), p. 72. Hokusai did not use the concepts of *Taiji* or *yin-yang* to explain the S-shaped composition in the manual.

10. Katsushika Hokusai, *Ryakuga haya oshie* (Edo: Tsutaya Jūsaburō, 1812), p. 11. 21. E-copy in National Institute of Japanese Literature (<https://kokusho.nijl.ac.jp/biblio/100275221> (<https://kokusho.nijl.ac.jp/biblio/100275221>)).

11. See Takeuchi Takahito, “Kanagawaoki namiura o koeta Obuse matsuri yatai tenjōga wa chūshōga e no michi,” Suwa Haru, *Hokusai no Nazowotoku: Seikatsu, Geijutsu, Shinkō* (Unravelling the Mysteries of Hokusai: Life, Art, and Faith) (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2001), p. 100, and linuma Masaharu, “Katsushika Hokusai to Obuse,” (Katsushika Hokusai and Obuse) in Hokusai-kan, ed., *Niku hitsu Katsushika Hokusai* (Original Prints by Katsushika Hokusai) (Obuse: Hokusai-kan, 1992), pp. 82–86.

12. For discussion of how Hokusai incorporated *Yijing* principles into his paintings, see Ng Wai-ming, “Geshi Beizhai huazuo zhong de yili” (*Yijing* Principles in the Works of Katsushika Hokusai), in Lai Tszpang, ed., *Zhouyi yu dongya wenhua* (The *Yijing* and East Asian Culture) (Shandong: Shandong University Press, 2027) (forthcoming).

13. Katsushika Hokusai, *Onmyō intō no maki*, p.2. Downloaded from The Ehon (Ukiyo-e Shunga) Database, The International Research Center for Japanese Studies (<https://lapis.nichibun.ac.jp/enp/Picture/View/92/1/2> (<https://lapis.nichibun.ac.jp/enp/Picture/View/92/1/2>)).

14. See Robmarie Lopez, “Hokusai’s Cranes: Themes of Duality and Longevity in the Artist’s Work,” *Review of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 12 (December 2014):49–54.

15. Hugh Davies, “From the Great Wave to Starry Night, How a Blue Pigment Changed the World,” *The Conversation*, Vol. 21 (July 2017). (<https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-from-the-great-wave-to-starry-night-how-a-blue-pigment-changed-the-world-81031> (<https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-from-the-great-wave-to-starry-night-how-a-blue-pigment-changed-the-world-81031>)).

16. Martin Bailey, *Starry Night: Van Gogh at the Asylum* (London: White Lion Publishing, 2018), pp. 81–82.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

18. Quoted from David Brooks, “Is There a Yin/Yang Symbol Within Starry Night?” The Vincent van Gogh Gallery (<https://vvgallery.com/visitors/007.htm> (<https://vvgallery.com/visitors/007.htm>)).

Abstract

Entering the twenty-first century, some Western art critics and online commentators began suggesting that Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) may have been inspired by *The Taiji Diagram* when creating *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (1831). However, these remarks have largely remained scattered, impressionistic, and lacking systematic analysis. The present article is the first attempt to offer a structured argument for the possible relationship between *The Great Wave* and *The Taiji Diagram*. Through an analysis of relevant primary sources and artworks, this article examines the hidden cultural symbolism of this world-famous *ukiyo-e* print from a fresh angle—namely, through the interpretive framework of *Yijing* principles. It proposes that Hokusai was likely inspired by *The Taiji Diagram* during the creation of *The Great Wave*.

Keywords: The Taiji Diagram; The Great Wave off Kanagawa; Katsushika Hokusai; Yinyang dualism; Van Gosh; cultural symbolism

Benjamin Wai-ming Ng is an emeritus professor of Japanese Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He has conducted research on the *Yijing* (Classic of Changes) in Japanese culture, and is the author of *The I Ching in Tokugawa Thought and Culture* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2000) and *China in Tokugawa Imagination* (SUNY Press, 2019), as well as the editor of *The Making of the Global Yijing in the Modern World* (Springer, 2021).