"Nihonmeizanzue" and the Representation of Landscapes in Ukiyo-e

Okubo Jun'ichi

The "Nihonmeizanzue" of Tani Bunchô depicting famous mountains in various parts of Japan is one of the masterpieces among the many books of pictures of landscapes published at the end of the Edo period. The greatest feature of this book is its realistic depictions based on sketches. Artists like Hakuun and Aōdō Denzen based their landscape pictures on this book.

In the area of ukiyo-e, and as typified by Utagawa Hiroshige, it was not rare for artists to produce pictures of famous sites based on highly realistic picture books and the patterns of illustrations in pictures of famous sites. It is for this reason that it is considered only natural that the composition of pictures in the "Nihonmeizanzue" depicting mountain landscapes was incorporated in pictures of famous sites produced by Hiroshige and other artists. Notwithstanding, there are not many examples of direct copies of illustrations of mountains from the "Nihonmeizanzue" in the pictures of famous sites painted by Utagawa Hiroshige I.

Pictures of mountains contained in the "Nihonmeizanzue" were actively incorporated in ukiyo-e that were warrior prints and history-and-legend prints. Mountains with grotesque forms depicted in the "Nihonmeizanzue" were often drawn in the background of the warrior prints and history-and-legend prints of Utagawa Kuniyoshi. These mountain landscapes had no geographical relationship with the scenes taken from tales depicted in the foreground, but were chosen entirely because the shapes of the mountains were considered suitable for the tense moods of the scenes in the pictures. Kuniyoshi's pupil, Taiso Yoshitoshi, also made frequent use of mountains contained in the "Nihonmeizanzue" in his warrior prints and history-and-legend prints. In this case too, there was no geographical relation between the scenes taken from tales and the mountains depicted in the background, as he chose mountains solely from the perspective of their shape and form.

The shapes of mountains in the "Nihonmeizanzue" were replicated in only a few ukiyo-e of famous sites. However, the method that used fine lines to depict the shapes of mountains three-dimensionally had a huge influence on the way that Hiroshige drew mountains in his pictures of famous sites. The same can also be said about the mountains drawn in the background of warrior prints made by Kuniyoshi, Yoshitoshi and others.

In conclusion, the realistic depiction of mountains in the "Nihonmeizanzue" had a considerable
influence on the representation of landscapes in ukiyo-e dating from the end of the Edo period.