

# A Study on Rai Sanyo's Painting Theory: Through the Reinterpretation of "Raikai (磊魄)" \*

SHIMAMURA Yukitada

*National Institute of Japanese Literature, Tokyo*

**Abstract:** Rai Sanyo (頼山陽, 1781–1832), a literati in the late Edo period, is well known as the author of *Nihon Gaishi* (日本外史). He produced many works of art, including landscape paintings, during his life. Nevertheless, little research has been done on his paintings. This study, by interpreting the keyword "Raikai (磊魄)," which Sanyo often used in his Chinese-style poems, aims to clarify Sanyo's theory of painting, characteristics of his landscape paintings, and the deep relationship between his landscape paintings and his historical or political thought. So, the discussion will proceed as follows. In the first section, I point out that Sanyo's inscriptions can be divided into two types, and I consider how Sanyo used the word Raikai. In the second section, I examine Raikai used in various poems and show that the production of landscape paintings was connected to Sanyo's way of life. In the final section, I show that Raikai was often represented as high mountains in Sanyo's landscape paintings.

**Keywords:** Rai Sanyo, Literati, Landscape Painting, Theory of Painting

## Introduction

This study aims to clarify thoughts on the paintings by the literati Rai Sanyo (頼山陽, 1780–1832). It focuses on some of Sanyo's inscriptions (poems written on paintings) and interprets the word "Raikai" (磊魄, also written as 磊塊) used in these poems.

Sanyo was born in Osaka in 1780. His father was Rai Shunsui (頼春水, 1746–1816), a Confucian scholar of the Hiroshima Domain. In 1800, Sanyo suddenly attempted to leave his domain but failed to do so. As a result, three years later, he was disinherited. Starting in 1811, Sanyo lived in Kyoto while running a private school. His representative works are *Nihon Gaishi* (日本外史: Unofficial history of Japan, 1836–1837) and *Tsugi* (通議: Sanyo's political thoughts, 1850). While writing these books, he also produced several works of art including poetry, calligraphy, and painting.

Most of Sanyo's paintings were produced after the death of his father, Shunsui, in 1816. Moreover, according to Yoshizawa Tadashi, most of these paintings depict landscapes (Yoshizawa 1977, p. 491). One of his best-known works is *Yabakei Zukan* (耶馬溪図巻: A scroll depicting the scenery of Yabakei, painted in 1819 and 1829), which made Yabakei in Oita a famous tourist destination for its scenic beauty reminiscent of Chinese landscape paintings. We can read about this in Tanomura Chikuden's (田能村竹田, 1777–1835) *Takedaso Shiyu Garoku*

\* This paper is based on the Japanese version printed in *Bigaku* 71, No. 2 (2020): 13-24, published by the Japanese Society for Aesthetics.

(竹田莊師友画録: Records of Chikuden's teachers and friends, 1833).

Most previous studies about Sanyo have focused on his historical views and political thoughts, or his poems. By contrast, there are only a few studies on Sanyo's paintings and his painting theory. One of them is Matsushita Hidemaro's "Typical Literati: Sanyo, Shunkin, and Kaioku's Paintings" (1976). Focusing on Sanyo's poems, Matsushita points out that Sanyo "often used the word Raikai in his poems, not only this, but his paintings expressed this Raikai as landscapes, eliminating color and striving to express the clear shade of his intention in black ink only" (Matsushita 1976, p. 118). Matsushita does not explain the meaning of Raikai, but Fukushima Riko gives this matter some attention in her "On the Inscriptions of Rai Sanyo" (1997). According to Fukushima, Raikai relates to Huang Tingjian (黄庭堅)'s "Kyotyū no Kyugaku" (胸中丘壑: Mountains in the mind) and Su Shi (蘇軾)'s "Kyoutyū no Seichiku" (胸中成竹: Completed bamboo in the mind) from the Song dynasty. In addition, Fukushima mentions that the source of Raikai is the word "Ruikai" (墨塊: lump), which is found in *A New Account of the Tales of the World* (世説新語). Thus, it also has the meaning of a pent-up feeling that cannot be suppressed. Such a feeling can be swept away by *sake* (酒) from his mind (Fukushima 1997, p. 74). It is true that Sanyo sometimes painted while he drank.

However, the discussions by Matsushita and Fukushima do not clarify the following points. First, why did Sanyo use Raikai instead of "Kyotyū no Kyugaku" (胸中丘壑) or "Kyoutyū no Seichiku" (胸中成竹)? Second, even if Ruikai was a pent-up feeling that cannot be suppressed, what exactly does Raikai mean? Consideration of this second point would help clarify the first question. Third, how did Sanyo depict Raikai in his paintings? By answering these research questions, this study aims to clarify Sanyo's thoughts on his painting.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, I point out that Sanyo's inscriptions can be divided into two types, and I consider how Sanyo used the word Raikai. In the following section, I examine Raikai used in various poems and show that the production of landscape paintings was connected to his historical or political thought. In the final section, I show that Raikai was often represented as high mountains in Sanyo's landscape paintings.

## 1. "Raikai" as a landscape image in the mind

According to Ibi Takashi, the inscriptions written on landscape paintings can be divided into two basic types (Ibi 2009, p. 213). In the first type, the poet's viewpoint is outside the painting, and in the second type, it is inside. The former contains such information as the circumstances under which the painting was painted, the relationship between the painter and the client, and the artist's thoughts about the painting. The latter type is composed "by the painter who accepts the world depicted in the picture as a reality and immerses himself/herself in that world" (Ibi 2009, p. 211). Hence, if we read a poem with the latter type of inscription, we can more easily understand the painting.

This distinction also applies to Sanyo's poems. *Ga-ni Dai-su* (題画: The poem for paint, 1820) is a good example of the latter type. It is included in *Sanyo Shisho* (山陽詩鈔: Sanyo's anthology of Chinese poetry, 1833), which Sanyo edited.

「題画」

石路霜乾踏葉行  
秋林連日正牢晴  
溪山深处有過雨  
却向峰前為水声

(*Sanyo Shisho*, Vol. 5.)

The meaning of this poem is as follows.

“I walked along a leaf-strewn stone path through the autumn woods, which had been clear for many days in a row. As I approached the peak, I could hear a waterfall, but it was louder than usual, probably due to a passing shower deep in the mountains.”

This poem is inscribed in such paintings as *Keizan Ugo Zu* (溪山雨後図: After rain on the mountain, 1822). The poem contains information that is not available to the viewer visually, namely the experience of a person crossing a bridge, which is depicted at the bottom of the painting. By reading the poem, the viewer will be able to sympathize the painting strongly and get feeling escaped from the mundane world.

So, many of Sanyo’s poems are of a different type. In these poems, the poet’s viewpoint is outside the painting, and Sanyo often expressed his thoughts about his paintings and used the word Raikai. For example, this term is used in *Jiga Sansui-ni Dai-su: Roku Shu* (題自画山水 六首: Six poems for landscapes, 1817), *Jiga Sansui-ni Dai-su: Ni Shu* (題自画山水 二首: Two poems for landscapes, 1818), and *Chikuto Shunkin-to Yo Gassaku Sansui-ni Dai-su* (題竹洞春琴与余合作山水: Poem for the joint work of Chikuto, Shunkin, and Sanyo, 1830). According to the production dates of these poems, Sanyo continued using Raikai as his favorite word. Here, I focus on one of the *Jiga Sansui-ni Dai-su: Roku Shu* (題自画山水 六首, 1817).

「題自画山水 六首」

董巨倪黄眼未看  
唯存磊砢自嘖嘖  
胸中粉本依吾樣  
休道人間無許山

(*Sanyo Shisho*, Vol. 2.)

The meaning of this poem is as follows.

“I (Sanyo) have never seen the works of Chinese literati painters, such as Dong Yuan (董源), Juran (巨然), Ni Zan (倪瓚), and Huang Gongwang (黄公望). I only have ‘Raikai’ in my mind. Additionally, it has the appearance of a towering peak. I painted its appearance, so it is no wonder that there is no mountain like that in the real world.”

The same theme is repeated in the poem *Chikuto Shunkin-to Yo Gassaku Sansui-ni Dai-su* (題竹洞春琴与余合作山水, 1830), which is included in *Sanyo Iko Shi* (山陽遺稿 詩: Sanyo’s collection of posthumous manuscripts, 1841). Chikuto in the title refers to Nakabayashi Chikuto (中林竹洞, 1776–1853) and Shunkin to Urakami Shunkin (浦上春琴, 1779–1846). Both were literati friends of Sanyo.

「題竹洞春琴与余合作山水」

施皴容易設枝難  
林有姿容石貌頑  
磊砢胸中存紛本  
諸君為樹我諸山

(*Sanyo Iko Shi*, Vol. 5.)

In this poem, Sanyo indicates the following.

“It is easy to paint mountains for me (Sanyo), but difficult to paint trees. This is because, while trees require skill to draw beautifully, stones are stubborn and can be painted in a simple manner. As for painting mountains, I have ‘Raikai’ in my mind. For this reason, I asked Chikuto and Shunkin to paint the trees and I painted the mountains.”

Indeed, Sanyo was aware that he was not skilled at painting trees, flowers, birds, buildings, or people. There is a short story about this in *Sanyo Sensei Daibatsu* (山陽先生題跋, 1832), in which Tanomura Chikuden knows that Sanyo was not good at painting buildings and figures, so Chikuden painted them first and let Sanyo freely paint the mountains.

According to Kono Motoaki's “Painting Examples and Reproductions” (2005), Hunpon “was originated in the process of tracing with white pigment (胡粉) along the underpainting drawn with black ink, and then tapping it onto paper or silk to complete the painting.” And later, it came to mean models of paintings, drawings, or reproductions. However, it is clear from the abovementioned poems that “Hunpon (紛本)” is not used in these senses. Rather, Sanyo used it with the sense of mountains in his mind, and he called it Raikai.

Therefore, in the second poem of *Jiga Sansui-ni Dai-su: Ni Shu* (題自画山水 二首, 1818), Sanyo said that Raikai is what is projected on the screen. This poem is written in *Syacha Taiyu Zu* (煮茗待友図: Making tea and waiting for a friend, 1818) (Fig. 1), *Koshi Hoyu Zu* (高士訪友図: A hermit waiting his friends in his hermitage, 1818).

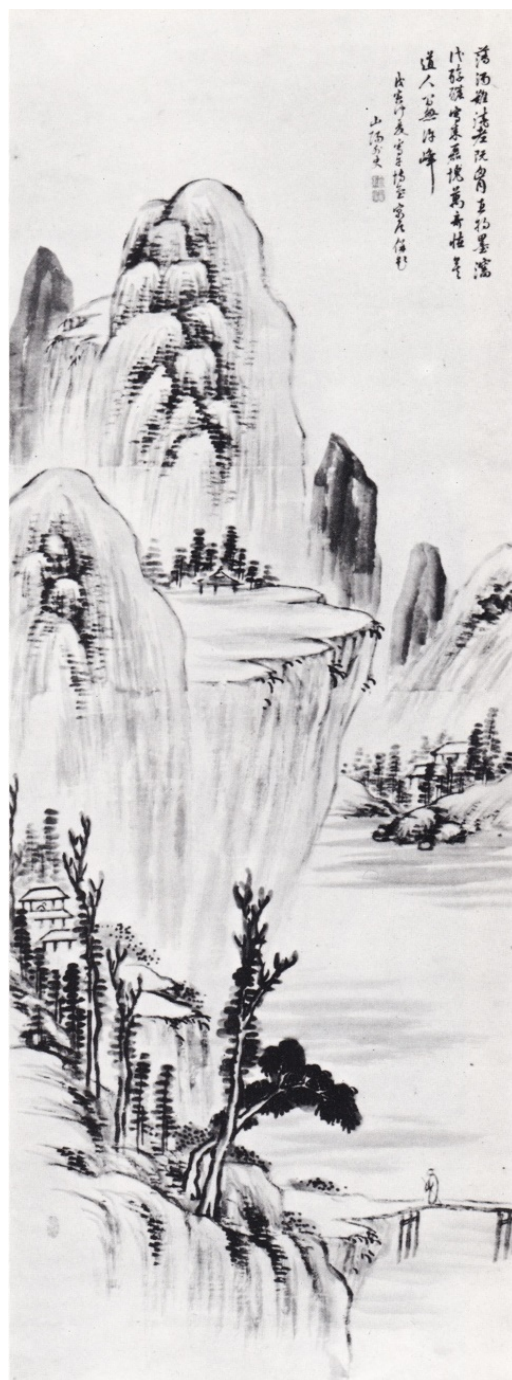


Fig. 1  
*Syacha Taiyu Zu* (煮茗待友圖)  
Making tea and waiting for friend  
1818, paper and ink, 134.7×49.9cm

「題自画山水 二首」  
 薄酒難澆老阮胸  
 直將墨瀋代醇濃  
 寫來磊塊萬奇怪  
 莫道人間無許峰

(*Rai Sanyo Shishu*, Vol.11.)

The meaning of this poem is as follows.

“It is difficult for an old man’s (Sanyo’s) chest to drink *sake*. So instead of *sake*, I used black ink and drew ‘Raikai’ on the screen. ‘Raikai’ refers to mountains with a truly mysterious shape. Please never say that mountains like this don’t exist in the real world.”

From the three poems discussed in this section, we can understand that the mountains in Sanyo's paintings of landscapes expressed his Hunpon, that is, Raikai in his mind. Thus, it seems that Raikai is close in meaning to “mountains in the mind” or “completed bamboo in the mind.” However, as mentioned in the introduction, it is unclear why Sanyo used Raikai instead of these words. Why did Sanyo insist on using Raikai? To understand why, we need to clarify a second meaning of Raikai that includes Sanyo’s pent-up feelings.

## 2. The reason why Sanyo chose the word “Raikai”

Raikai is an extremely important word in Sanyo’s works. In fact, Raikai often appears in his Chinese poems and letters, not only in his inscriptions (poems written on paintings).

*Rai Sanyo Shisen* (2012)’s editor Ibi Takashi treats Raikai as a different problem than inscriptions. According to Ibi, Sanyo already used Raikai in a letter in his youth (Ibi 2012, p. 329). For example, in the letter he sent to his friend Takemoto Hokurin (武元北林, 1770–1820) in 1810, Sanyo wrote that, finally, some Raikai had left without disappearing in his mind. The meaning of Raikai here is a feeling of guilt toward his family for attempting to leave his domain, as he was young and desired to redeem himself through historiography. Indeed, Sanyo reunited with his father Shunsui (1813), from whom he had been estranged, by the completion of *Nihon Gaishi* (historiography was also Shunsui’s dream).

However, it seems that Raikai never completely disappeared from Sanyo’s mind. Throughout his life, Sanyo continued to hold onto Raikai. We can confirm this in the poem *Toketu-wo Wazura-i Tawamu-reni Uta-wo Na-su* (患咳血戲作歌: The poem composed immediately after vomiting blood, 1832). At the time when he composed this poem, Sanyo was already suffering from a mortal illness. Only the first half of the poem is quoted below.

「患咳血戲作歌」  
 吾有一腔血有  
 其色正赤其性熱  
 不能瀝之明主前  
 赤光燦向廟堂徹  
 又不能濺之國家難

留痕大地碧弗滅  
 鬱積徒成磊塊凝  
 欲吐不吐中逾熱  
 一旦喀出學李賀  
 難收糝地紅玉屑

(*Sanyo Iko Shi*, Vol. 7.)

The meaning of this poem is as follows.

“The red-hot blood that flows in my body cannot be poured out for my monarch or against the national crisis. This unfulfilled feeling is building up in the mind and hardening into Raikai. I try to get it out, but I can't, and it gets hotter and hotter in my mind. I imitated the Tang dynasty poet Li He and spit it (Raikai) out, my red blood [this is a metaphor for ink] splatters all over the screen and cannot be contained.”

As indicated in this poem, Sanyo was never satisfied with the political situation of his time. However, he was not able to directly influence politics. It is not difficult to imagine that Sanyo's position would have continued to make him depressed. For example, in the first poem of *Shintyo Tsugi-no Nochi-ni Dai-su: Nana Shu* (題新著通議後 七首: Seven poems after the new book *Tsugi*) (1830), Sanyo said that he remained a bystander to the political situation of the time but that he still could not help but feel resentment toward the state of the world. Thus, he wrote *Tsugi*. Such a feeling must have flowed into his artwork as well.

To verify this, I refer to the poem *Koga Hukei So-no Hankou-no Tame-ni Wa-ga Ga-wo Saku-shi Ken Ippuku-wo Mo-tte Kore-wo Syo-shi Kore-wo Ji-su* (古賀溥卿為其藩侯索吾画寄以絹一幅書此辞此: Instead of paintings Koga Hukei commissioned for Hankou, he wrote this poem on silk, 1830). Koga Hukei (1778–1836) was a Confucian scholar of the Saga Domain, and Hankou was 10th Lord of the Saga Domain Nabeshima Naomasa (鍋島直正, 1815–1871). By the time Sanyo composed this poem, Koga Hukei had already passed away.

「古賀溥卿為其藩侯索吾画寄以絹一幅書此辞此」

磊魄橫胸不自持  
 吐為狂墨湧淋漓  
 此心宥有故人識  
 敢向侯門喚画師

曾謝橫經弄翰儒  
 寧將余技待觀娛  
 懷中画本猶獻堪  
 彷彿颯風七月凶

(*Sanyo Iko Shi*, Vol. 5.)

The meaning of this poem is as follows.

“I (Sanyo) can't hold the 'Raikai' lying in my mind. If I let it out, it will become an ink painting overflowing with vigor. The late Koga Hukei knew very well that I do not like to be

called a painter by the Lord of the Saga Domain.”

“I have already strayed from the way of becoming a Confucian scholar who studies diligently and enjoy making some texts and poems. Who is looking forward to waiting for my painting by avocation? Even so, the images in my mind should be worthy of being given to you. And it will express my feelings about the suffering of people’s lives.”

First, I focus on the phrase “敢向侯門喚画師” in the first verse. As symbolized by words such as “Chi (痴: unwiseness)” and “Setsu (拙: unskillful),” Sanyo’s attitude like this is typical for literati who consider that drawing skills are not always positively valued. This theme was particularly important to Sanyo, and is expressed, for example, in the description he wrote on *Kanrin Houyu Zu* (寒林訪友図: Visiting a friend in winter mountain, 1827). The description is as follows.

舐筆寧追画匠群  
研池余墨愛清氛  
撐腸書卷為何用  
結作蓬蓬幾幅雲

The meaning of this poem is as follows.

“Even if I [Sanyo] took a brush, I could not draw a painting like made by professionals (because Sanyo is an amateur painter). However, I love the clean fragrance of the ink left on the inkstone. If I wrote some words, I could not earn enough. The mountains down shapes like clouds rising up.” According to this poem and the second verse of *Koga Hukei So-no Hankou-no Tame-ni Wa-ga Ga-wo Saku-shi Ken Ippuku-wo Mo-tte Kore-wo Syo-shi Kore-wo Ji-su*, Sanyo thought painting was one of avocations.

Next, let us look at the second verse. *Kaityu-no Gahon* (懷中画本: Models for painting in the mind) is a word that paraphrases *Raikai* and evokes *Hinpu Shichigatu* (翺風七月). *Hinpu Shichigatu* is the name of one of the chapters in *Classic of Poetry* (詩經: *Shijing*) that contains Chinese poems about the hardships of people’s lives. Therefore, we should assume that underlying Sanyo’s *Kaityu-no Gahon* (懷中画本) or *Raikai* is his concern for the lives of people or his interest in political issues. Of course, it should be remembered that *Koga Hukei* was commissioned by a Confucian scholar of the Saga Domain. However, considering the content of *Toketu-wo Wazura-i Tawamu-reni Uta-wo Na-su* (患咳血戲作歌), we can understand that Sanyo’s argument in *Koga Hukei So-no Hankou-no Tame-ni Wa-ga Ga-wo Saku-shi Ken Ippuku-wo Mo-tte Kore-wo Syo-shi Kore-wo Ji-su* (古賀溥卿為其藩侯索吾画寄以絹一幅書此辞此) was consistent with that of his other works.

From the discussion, it is evident that the landscapes painted by Sanyo were not only intended to be pleasing to the viewer’s eyes or minds but also need to be considered as an expression of his thoughts as a historian and political thinker. This may be the reason that Sanyo chose the word “*Raikai*” and did not use “*Kyotyū no Kyugaku*” (胸中丘壑) or “*Kyoutyū no Seichiku*” (胸中成竹) (of course, this could also be a matter concerning the rules of Chinese poetry, but I do not consider this to be a direct reason for choosing *Raikai*). Next, the issue is how Sanyo depicted *Raikai* in his works. I discuss this question in the following section.

### 3. Expression of “Raikai”

According to Sanyo, Raikai has the appearance of towering peaks. In fact, in the poems mentioned above, Sanyo used the words Sangan (巖岫: Towering peak) or Mine (峰), which means towering peaks. These are important elements that always appear in Sanyo's landscape paintings.

Sanyo seems to have a preference for depicting high peaks by using high distancing perspective (高遠) and deep distancing perspective (深遠) (these are two of three rules perspective (三遠法) in Chinese landscape drawing). This is supported by Chikuden's description on *Suiboku Syukei* (水墨秋景: Autumn scenery in black ink, 1834). In this poem, Chikuden said that Sanyo believed that the mountain at the center of the painting should be high and prominent, and that the mountain should express the personality of the painter. Furthermore, according to Chikuden's *Matamata Ishiraku Jo-no Nochi-ni Syo-su* (書亦復一樂帖後: Afterword for *Yet Again One More Pleasure*, 1831), Sanyo was not a great painter, but the popularity of his work was due to the fact that Kousyo-no Ki (高尚之氣: Lofty personality) is expressed in his landscapes, which were drawn as if he were writing calligraphy.

As is well known, in Asian painting theory including Guo Ruoxu (郭若虛)'s *Overview of Painting* (圖畫見聞志, 11c), the personality of the painter is said to be expressed in the painting. So, the viewers of Sanyo's landscapes should have perceived his noble and intellectual character in these.

Thus, how exactly are these high peaks depicted?

According to Sanyo, painting a peak is similar to painting the face of a beautiful woman, as shown in the following poem.

「題自画山水 六首」  
 用墨疎疎用筆鬆  
 画成皴染淡如空  
 貌山匹似美人面  
 眉暈頰渦髻髻中

(*Sanyo Shisho*, Vol. 2.)

The meaning of this poem is as follows.

“The use of ink and brushwork was so rough, resulting in a very washy painting. Painting mountains is similar to painting a beautiful woman's face. Thus, mountains will remind people of blurred eyebrows and dimples on the cheeks.”

A similar poem is written on *Jigasan Sansui Zu* (自画贊山水圖: Landscape and inscription, date unknown) (Fig. 2), which was painted in the dry brush technique. In this work, there is a meandering line of peaks running from the near view at the bottom to the far view at the top. The peaks seem to grow higher and higher as one moves farther back. The ridge line, like a blurred eyebrow, becomes thinner as one moves away from the summit. However, only the upper part of the mountain is depicted. The body of the mountain also has straight lines parallel to the mountain's ridges. According to the *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* (芥子園画伝, 1679), straight lines are one of the painting techniques especially favored by Huang Gongwang and are applied to add strength to the steep appearance of the mountain. In contrast to the mountains, the valleys are covered with clouds or fog and are hollowed out like dimples so that the bottoms of



the mountains cannot be seen. The depth of the valleys is emphasized. So, all these aspects are thought to accentuate the soaring appearance of the peaks.

In addition, “Ha (坡: A flat area drawn in the middle of mountains)” is placed in various places on the peaks in this painting. Sanyo frequently depicted such flat areas in his landscape paintings, not only in this painting. Viewers of the painting are asked to imagine themselves sitting on Ha (坡) and enjoying the view in the painting. In addition, Ha (坡) enhances the height of the vertically extending peaks. This is because it makes the viewer aware of horizontal direction. This is evident in *Syacha Taiyu Zu* (煮茗待友图) (Fig. 1).

## Conclusion

Most of the landscape paintings produced by Sanyo depict high peaks. Indeed, as Chikuden mentioned, we should first read the artist’s character in Sanyo’s works. However, if we pay attention to the word “Raikai,” we may realize the deeper meaning of Sanyo’s landscapes. This study confirms that Sanyo attempted to directly express the Raikai that was inside his mind. However, it does not only refer to ideal landscapes in his mind. This is because Raikai is the accumulation and massification of Sanyo’s concern for the state of the nation in his heart. In other words, Sanyo’s paintings were deeply related to his life history, his view of history, and his political thoughts. Sanyo’s painting has not been the subject of much discussion, having been regarded as nothing more than amateurish art by previous studies. However, by focusing on the word Raikai, this study clarifies that Sanyo’s painting was by no means just a small facet of his life.

Up to now, research on Sanyo’s works has been conducted separately to consider his poetry, calligraphy, historical views, and political thought. However, by focusing on the word Raikai as an example, this study shows that Sanyo’s art, historical views, and political thoughts are inseparable and should not be discussed separately.



Fig. 2  
*Jigasan Sansui Zu* (自画贊山水图:  
Landscape and inscription) date unknown,  
paper and ink, 122.5×37.0cm

---

## References

- Fukushima, Riko. 1997. "Rai Sanyo no Daigashi wo Megutte (About Rai Sanyo's inscriptions)" in *Edo-period Literature* Vol.17, 62-77.
- Ibi, Takashi. 2009. *Kinsei Bungaku no Kyokai (The Boundary of Early Modern Literature: The Change of Self and Expression)*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- Ibi, Takashi. 2012. "Kaisetsu (The Commentary of Rai Sanyo Shisen)" *Rai Sanyo Shisen (Selected Poems of Rai Sanyo's Chinese Poems)*, 325-361.
- Kizaki, Aikichi & Rai, Seiichi (Eds.). 1932. *Rai Sanyo Shishu (Collection of Rai Sanyo's Chinese Poems)*, Hiroshima: The Association in Honor to the Accomplishments of Rai Sanyo.
- Kono, Motoaki. 2005. "Hunpon to Mosha (Painting Examples and Reproductions)" in *Studies in the History of Japanese Art* Vol.2, 103-132.
- Matsushita, Hidemaro. 1976. "Typical Literati: Sanyo, Shunkin, and Kaioku's Paintings" in *Bunjingasuihen (Essence of Literati Paintings)* Vol.18, 113-123.
- Yoshizawa, Tadashi. 1977. *Nihon Nanga Ronso (Studies about Japanese Painting in the Literati Style)*, Tokyo: Kodansha.

## Acknowledgment

This work was supported by Grant-in-Aid for JSPS Fellows Grant Number 23KJ2143.