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# Painting Manuals and the Illustration of Ming and Qing Popular Literature

ROBERT E. HEGEL

Scholarly comparisons between painting and printed pictures generally focus on the shortcomings of the printed illustration. The limitations of the technology, specifically of the knife on the wooden board, would seemingly prejudice any comparisons between these two media in terms of the fluidity of linear form or movement, the range of line breadth and darkness, the ability to create shading of the brush on paper or silk. Yet as the Queens Library exhibition *Visible Traces: Rare Books and Special Collections from the National Library of China* demonstrated, printed pictures on paper could achieve many of the same effects of shading, coloration, and modulation of line. To do so, however, required enormous skill and painstaking effort on the part of many craftsmen working together to create a block-printed page, again a marked contrast to the more solitary studies in ink by the individual painter. It is on this point that the operative dissimilarities between paintings and prints become visible: in terms of social status and cultural stature, paintings and prints are seemingly separated by a greater cultural gulf than they are by the details of the images created on the paper. My purpose here is not to examine paintings, but instead to use printed albums, many of which ostensibly recreate paintings, as a lens through which to understand the art and significance of a range of other printed pictures. I compare printed works from this exhibition that occupy various positions along the artistic and social continuum bounded by painting albums and manuals on the one end and various types of popular

literature on the other. My concern here is with what we see on the paper, why, and, most important, what these images might mean in social and cultural terms, rather than with the process of their production.<sup>1</sup> My conclusions are necessarily more intuitive than scientific; hence I present them as reflections and speculations.

#### ALBUMS OF PICTURES

It is well known that China's earliest printed books were illuminated religious texts first produced during the Tang period (618–906). The most famous is the ninth-century *Jin'gang bore boluomi jing* (Diamond Sutra) now in the British Library. Its frontispiece is the only illustration: presumably it was intended to set the reader's mood for reading the scripture itself (see figure 1). It presents the Buddha in his glory, surrounded by monks, heavenly beings, and earthly donors as he begins his dialogue with his disciple Subhuti. In contrast to the portraits of individual Buddhist figures to be seen in later religious texts and in temples,

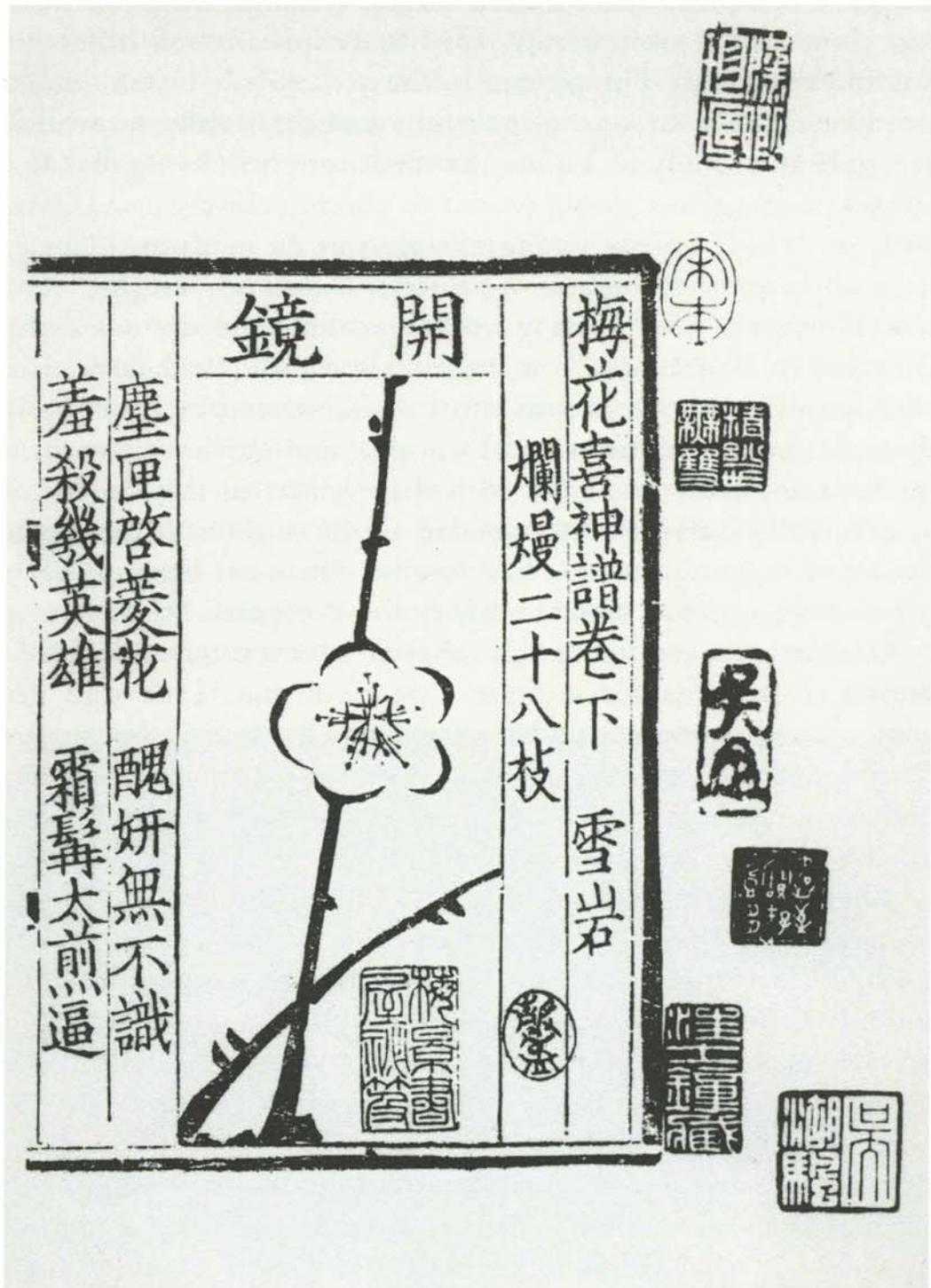


1. Frontispiece from the *Jin'gang bore boluomi jing*, dated 868, in the British Library, reprinted from Frances Wood, *Chinese Illustration* (London: British Library, 1985), pp. 8–9.

this image is complex, consisting of floor coverings, hangings from the ceiling, cloud and flower motifs, apsaras, at least fifteen other human figures, and two lions. The picture is “busy,” crowded with detail: one cannot take it all in at one glance; one must carefully scrutinize the picture, gaze at it, study it. To use the terminology of Ming (1368–1644) authors on painting, one might expect to observe closely (*guan*, *xikan*, or *guan**cha*), or “read” (*du*, as in the meaning of *du* in Zhou Liangong’s seventeenth-century evaluation of painters, *Duhua lu*), not just “look at” (*kan*) such pictures. One need not consider this picture a work of great artistic value to be drawn into it. Inevitably we must conclude that it is invested with the sort of intense effort demonstrated by other works of Buddhist art, both sculptures and paintings, and that it elicits the same sort of intense interaction (*xisi*) with the viewer. In this context especially, one could interpret the intended action as the sort of concentration of focus suggested in the directive for Chan meditation, *zhi guan*: “stop (all self-conscious mental activity), and observe.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course the picture in this religious text was never equated with a painting. I have explored these aspects of the text’s one printed illustration as an avenue for addressing printed albums, the pictures in works of fiction, and painting manuals. My contention is that in viewing these several types of printed pictures one should rely on the clues provided by the works themselves.

The earliest extant block-printed album is generally considered to be Song Boren’s (fl. 1235) *Meihua xishen pu* (The Plum: A Portrait Album) of 1261 (see figure 2). This beautiful work, now in the Shanghai Museum, contains one hundred illustrations with brief poetic commentaries, each of which is filled with complex allusions to contemporary political events and personages. But its individual pictures are simple: they tell no stories, include no strange or exotic images. Each was carefully drawn and carefully carved onto a board for printing; the carver used broad black areas judiciously to indicate the dark, perhaps wet, branches of a gnarled old plum tree. Here it is the level of art, and the richness of variation between these hundred images, not the complexity of any one, that demand the reader’s attention. Although the motivation might be different, with this text as with the Buddhist scripture, the appropriate response on the part of the viewer is extended careful



2. *Meihua xishen pu*, in the Shanghai Museum, reprinted from *Songke Meihua xishen pu*, compiled by Song Boren (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1982), p. 26a.

attention, especially if one is to savor the political commentary imbedded in the poetry as well as the art of the blossoms.<sup>3</sup>

This approach was clearly intended with every album of paintings produced by block-printing techniques; it would appear that albums were intended to be scrutinized carefully to appreciate their artistic complexities, to discern the allusions to earlier works, and to respond intellectually and emotionally—rather like one might respond to fine paintings. Several of the major late-Ming albums of paintings involved acknowledged painters in their production. For example, *Lidai minggong huapu* (The Manual of Paintings by Famous Masters of Successive Periods), also known as *Gu shi huapu* (The Gu Family's Manual of Paintings), was compiled by the court artist Gu Bing and published in 1603. Another copy of the original edition, carved by Liu Guangxin, is in the Shanghai Museum.<sup>4</sup> The 106 illustrations in this album reputedly reproduce famous paintings of the past.

Gu Bing was a member of a family of professional painters, artists whose skills could be called upon to paint pictures that would serve as decorations and as gifts for customers and, if they had a court appointment, for members of the imperial family. In 1599 Gu Bing was selected to work in the palace because of his consummate skill in bird and flower painting; it may be that pictures in his album were drawn from paintings he saw in imperial collections. But some of the pictures here cannot be reproductions of paintings that he had seen in the capital; they had been lost for centuries before his time. Likewise, although certain of these printed illustrations reproduce paintings relatively well, others seem to recreate subjects and elements of style associated with the painter they identify rather than a specific known painting (see figure 3).<sup>5</sup> Some have speculated that Gu's manual might have served as a "buyer's guide" to help distinguish genuine paintings from false attributions,<sup>6</sup> but I would suspect a less commercial appeal for books of this sort: I believe that the primary function of these pictures was to be educational. Like so many other books of philosophy, history, and literature published by woodblock technology over the previous centuries, this album, too, was primarily meant to be a textbook, a book to be studied carefully, pored over, in an effort to notice every small detail of every picture as a means to distinguish differences among the styles and techniques of famous painters.



3. *Lidai minggong huapu*, compiled by Gu Bing, 1603; National Library, Beijing. *Visible Traces* catalogue, no. 8, p. 38.

Gu's manual seems to be a guide for the relatively uninitiated viewer of paintings with which he might expand his knowledge of artists of the past and thereby refine his own cultural sensibilities.

Other, later, albums might have functioned more as elegant curiosities. *Cheng shi moyuan* (The Ink Garden of the Cheng Family), for example, edited by Cheng Dayue and published in 1606 (see figure 4), includes reproductions of drawings by well-known contemporary artists such as Ding Yunpeng (1547–ca. 1628). It was carved by at least three members of the famous Huang family of artisans from Huizhou. Produced in part to compete with another catalogue of inkblock pictures

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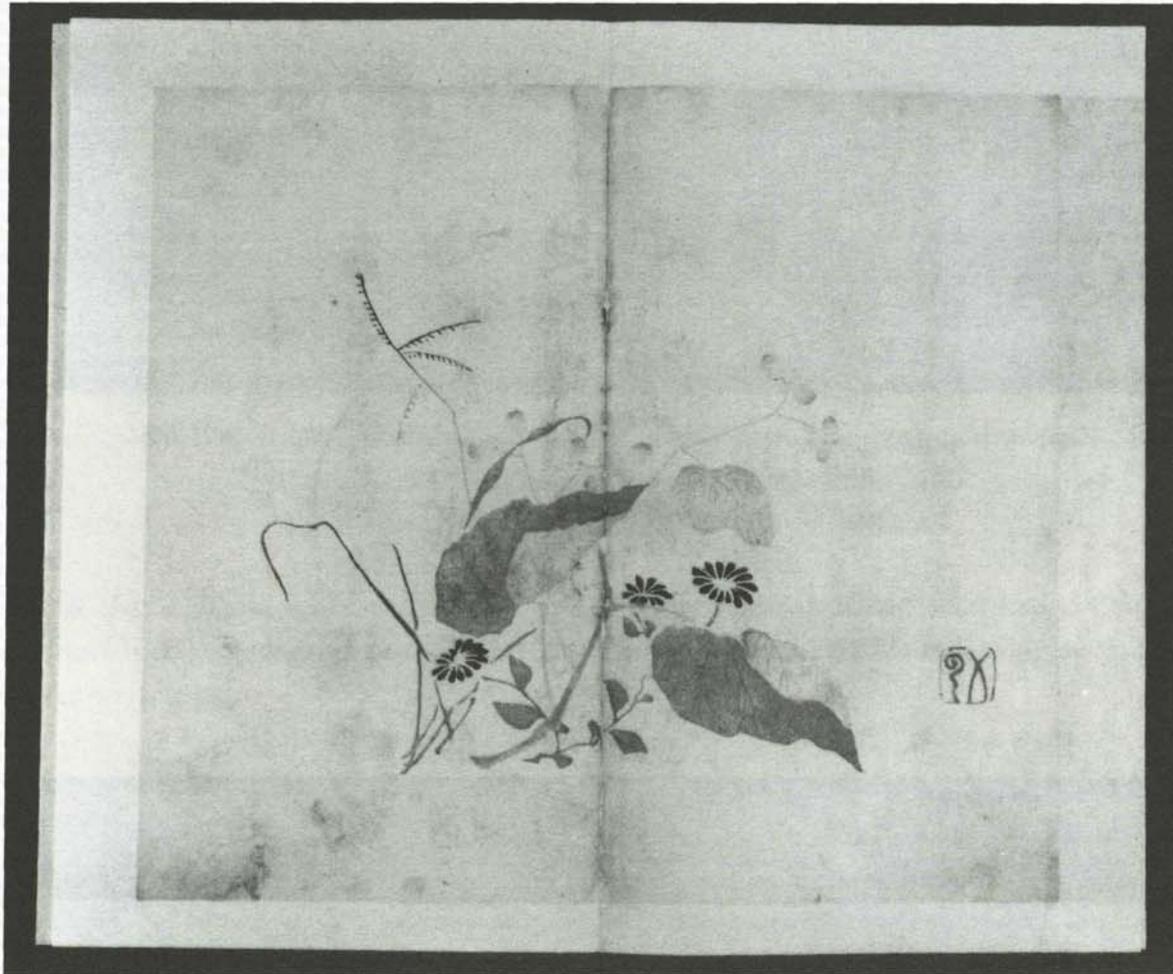


4. *Cheng shi moyuan*, edited by Cheng Dayue and published in 1606, National Library, Beijing; reprinted from Chang Pide, ed., *Mingdai banhua xuan*, First Collection (Taipei: Guoli Zhongyang tushuguan, 1969), vol. 1, p. 48.

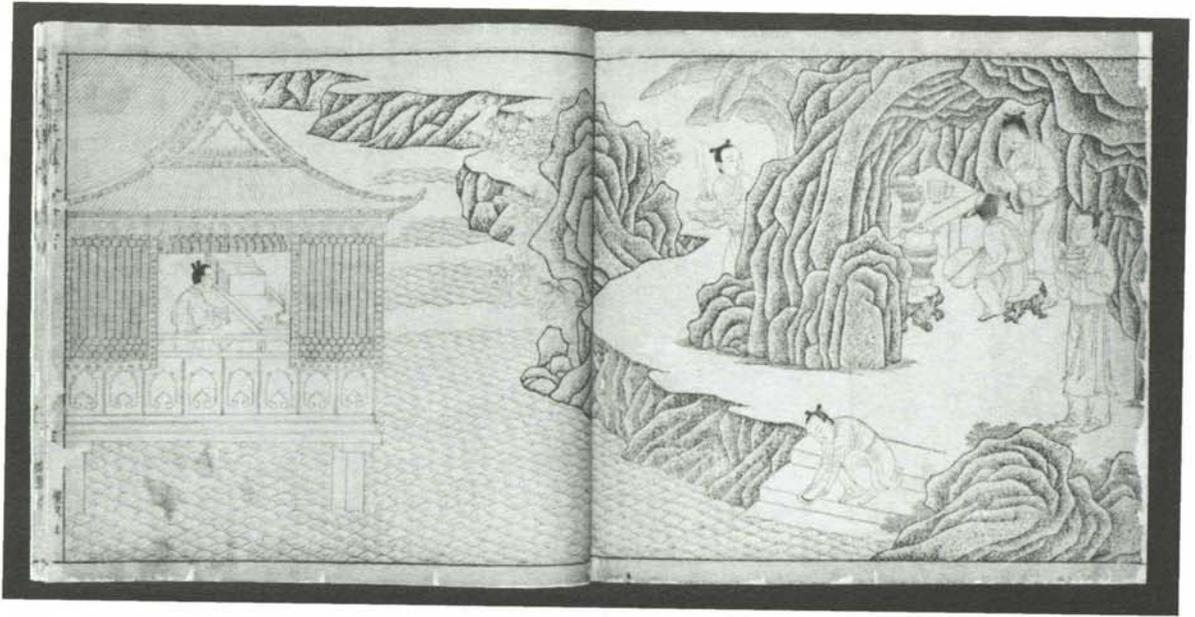
published around 1589 by a rival entrepreneur, it responded to the late-Ming “culture of curiosity” by even including European pictures on Christian subjects produced by foreigners and provided to the compiler by the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) when they met in Beijing.<sup>7</sup> One can only conclude that such prints were also carefully scrutinized for all their details, but from a sense of curiosity rather than as a means of either cultural instruction or religious edification.

Hu Zhengyan’s *Shizhu zhai shuhua pu* (Ten Bamboo Studio Manual of Calligraphy and Painting), published in Nanjing between 1619 and 1633, is an extraordinary accomplishment of the printer’s art (see figure 5). Printed with dampened paper and partial printing blocks (*taose yinshua*), it uses five colors to achieve shades of color normally not possible in block-printed images. That same technology today can produce reprints indistinguishable to the untrained eye from modern watercolors (witness the Rongbaozhai reprints of works by Qi Baishi [1863 or 1864–1957] or the reproductions of paintings by Xu Beihong [1895–1953] printed recently in Beijing).<sup>8</sup> However, these pictures were not designed to deceive the viewer about the means of their production; instead they meant to impress the connoisseur of the book with the skill required for their creation. Here, as in the other albums already discussed, proper appreciation requires careful attention—and extended, attentive viewing.

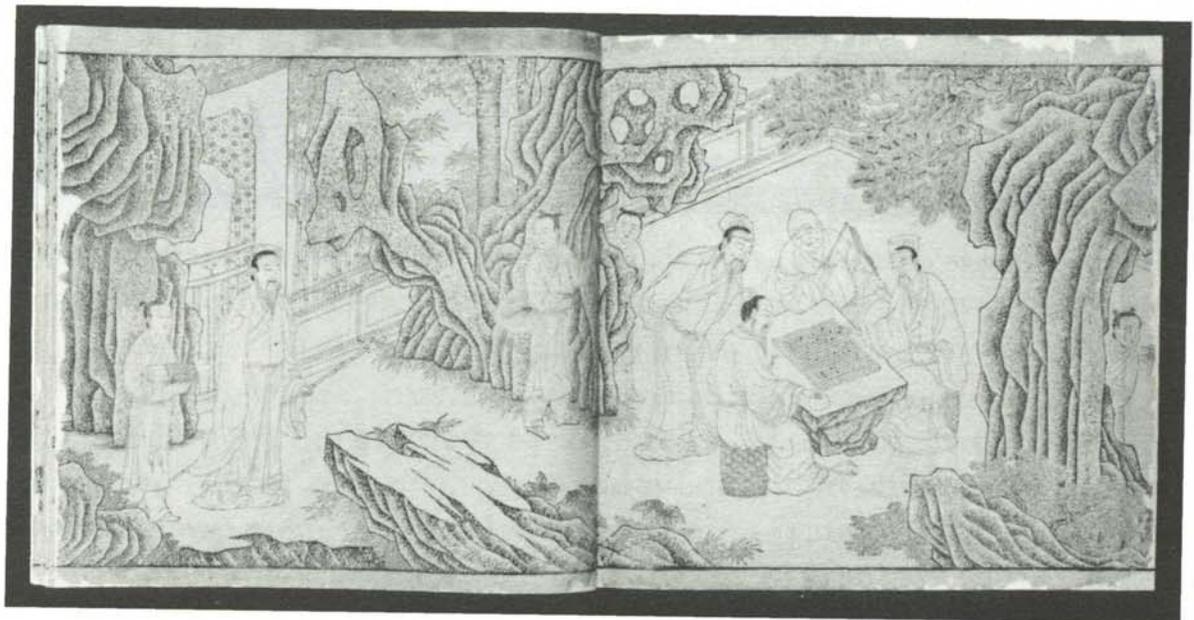
The same is generally true for *Zuoyin xiansheng jingding jiejing yi pu* (Manual of Chess Carefully Edited by Gentleman Zuoyin), compiled by Wang Tingna (ca. 1569–after 1628). Its illustrations place the chess players and their servants in the foreground; backgrounds are rich with sometimes fantastic details of close-up rocks and trees (see figures 6A–C). The great looming stones are particularly significant for the texture imparted to their surfaces by the careful carving by another member of the renowned Huang family, Huang Yingzu (1563 or 1573–1644). Likewise, the larger tree trunks appear twisted and misshapen from age, as indicated by the lines in their bark. In terms of subject matter (especially the gatherings of scholars), composition, and individual decorative elements, these pictures resemble the narrative paintings of professional artists popular at that time, such as Qiu Ying (fl. 1494–1552) and others. Given the enormous effort and skill invested in their production, these books must have been very expensive, as were the other books produced



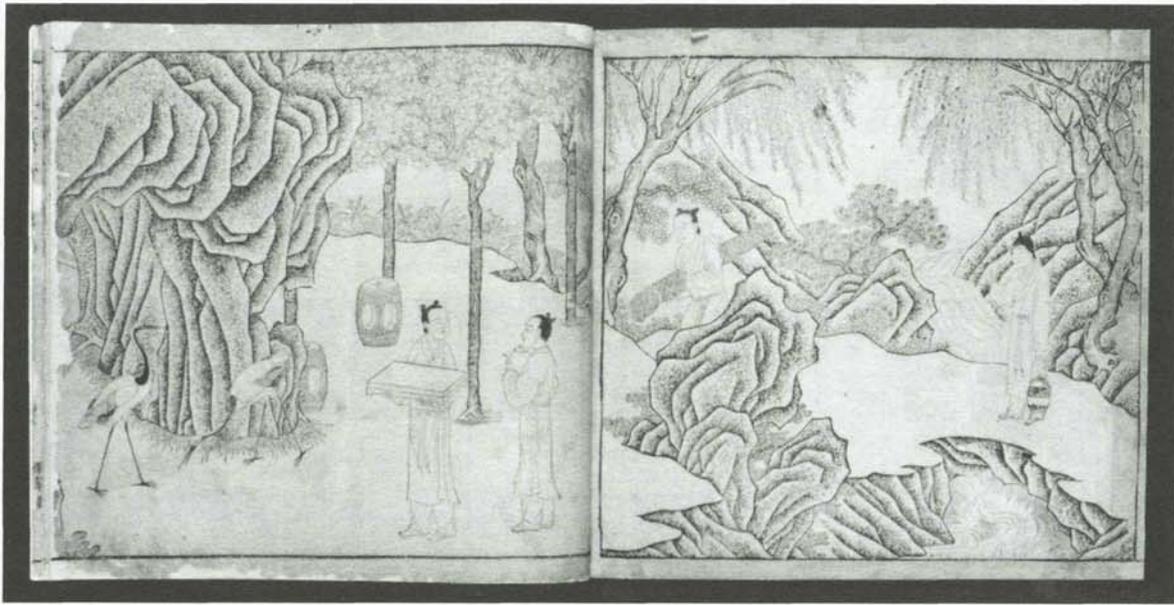
5. Hu Zhengyan's *Shizhu zhai shuhua pu*, published in Nanjing between 1619 and 1633, National Library, Beijing. *Visible Traces* catalogue, no. 15, p. 66.



6A. *Zuoyin xiansheng jingding jiejing yi pu*, National Library, Beijing. *Visible Traces* catalogue, no. 10, pp. 48-49.



6B. *Zuoyin xiansheng jingding jiejing yi pu*, continued.

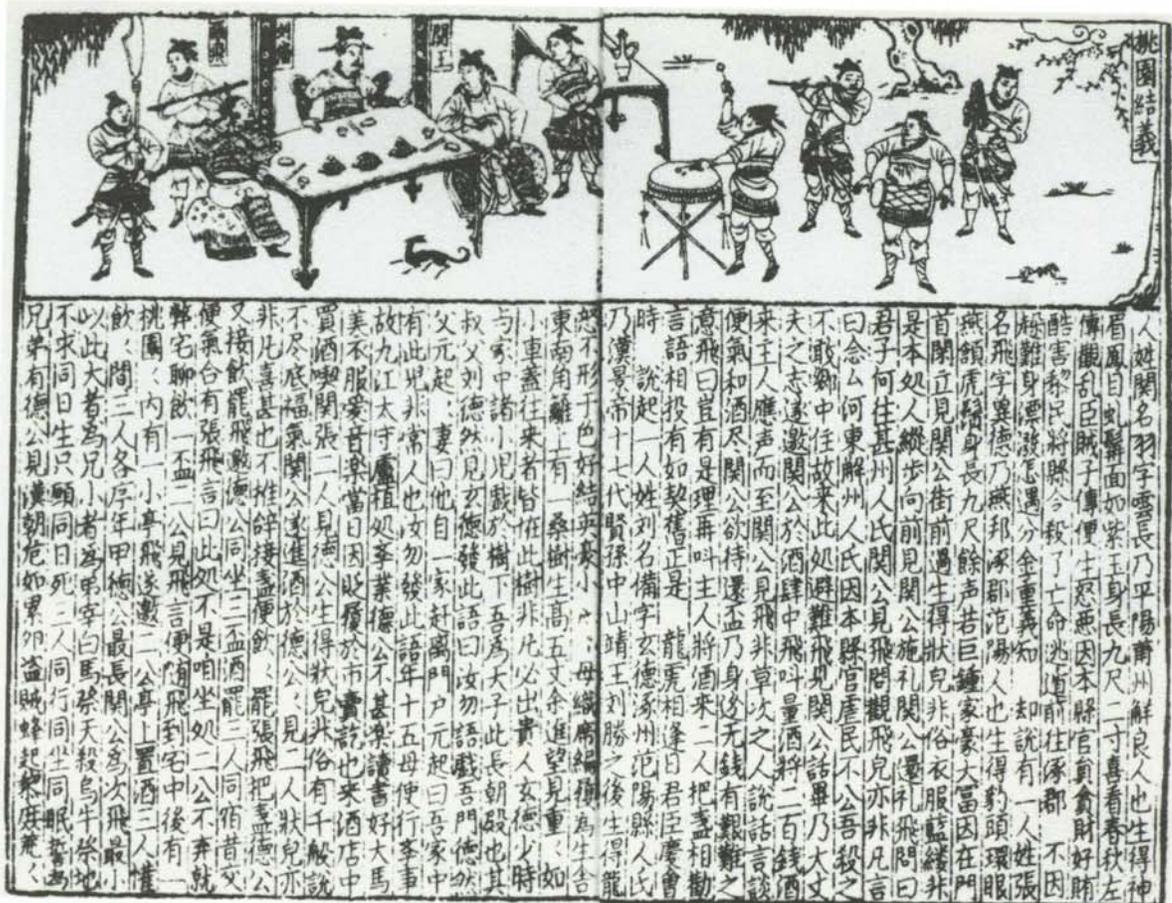


6c. *Zuoyin xiansheng jingding jiejing yi pu*, continued.

by Wang Tingna's *Huancuitang*.<sup>9</sup> And their figural complexity must have demanded extensive consideration before one could fully appreciate their artistry.

#### ILLUSTRATIONS FOR POPULAR LITERATURE

The oldest extant examples of illustrated popular literature in China are the “fully illustrated” lengthy historical narratives (*quanxiang pinghua*) printed in Fujian in the 1330s. Although they did not originate it, these long stories exemplify what was to become the dominant format for printing fiction and plays through the middle of the Ming period, that of “illustration above, text below” (*shangtu xiawen*; see figure 7). Readers could either look at the illustrations or read the text or, more likely, let their eyes wander back and forth between text and pictures as they proceeded through the book. Many have interpreted this format as designed to give hints about character and plot development to the poor reader; in my opinion these editions were intended to give a range of aesthetic experience simultaneously—and inexpensively—from both words and images. This is because the illustrations only picture the highlights

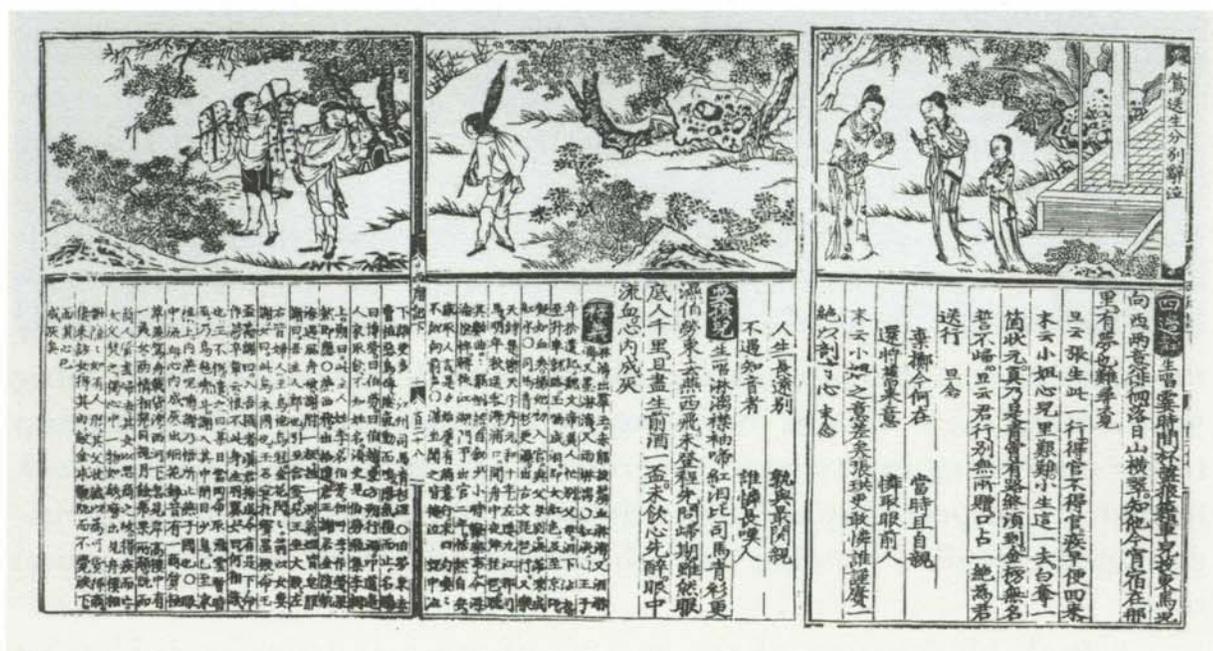


7. *Quanxiang pinghua Sanguo zhi* (Fully Illustrated Plain Tale from the Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms), reprinted from *Yuan Zhizhiben quanxiang pinghua Sanguo zhi* (Tokyo, ca. 1925), p. 6; personal collection.

of the attached narrative; they do not reveal the whole story's narrative continuity or the motivations of characters. Many of these illustrations are, however, quite complex and, as we can see, were hardly lacking in artistic appeal. Like the later albums we have been considering, these fourteenth-century illustrations for narrative place central characters in the foreground while filling in backgrounds with appropriate secondary figures and natural and architectural details. Because, like the plum-blossom album, these pages were bound "butterfly style" (*hudiezhuang*), the picture was carved on a single block, and when the printed page was folded inward, the entire picture was visible at one time. But compared to that exquisite Song-period (960–1279) plum-blossom album, these popular books were physically much smaller—necessitating, it would

seem, that more pains be taken in the carving of the block. I infer, then, that readers might have lingered over these illustrations, too, to drink in the artist's rendering of the scene, to ponder their differing presentation of the narrative of the text.

Popular literature printed in this format could be considerably more attractive than these early examples. Perhaps the most impressive is the 1498 large-format edition of the Yuan-period (1271–1360) play cycle *Xixiang ji* (The Western Wing) by Wang Dexin (fl. 1295–1307; also known as Wang Shifu), printed in Beijing and now in the Beijing University Library. Highly detailed illustrations here continue onward page after page in some instances, leading the reader, like the viewer of a painting mounted as a handscroll, through segment after segment of what is essentially one very long picture (see figure 8). Each of these illustrations is rich in detail and, again, worthy of extended, observant, viewing.<sup>10</sup> Their immediate analogue in the field of painting is the extended narrative scrolls produced by professional painters of the Ming and Qing (1368–1911), the same models followed by the *Manual of Chess* discussed earlier; like handscrolls these play illustrations include narrative



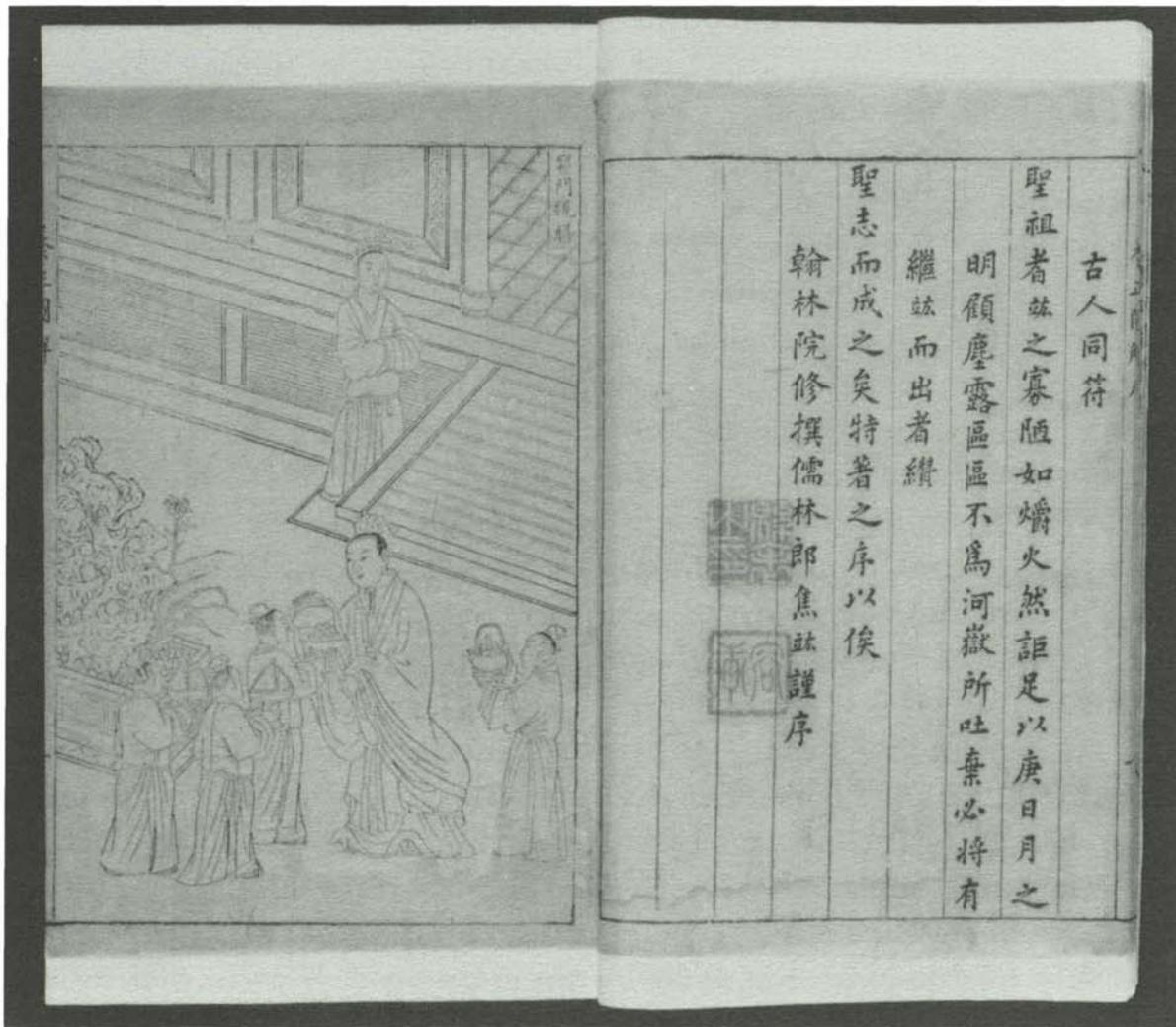
8. *Xixiang ji*, 1498, Beijing University Library, reprinted from *Xinkan qimiao quanxiang zhushi Xixiang ji* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1955).

segments, character studies, and landscape scenes. But narrative art came to be scorned by the amateur scholar-painters of China's elite after about 1600, with the result that such elaborate pictures became increasingly rare in novels and plays published during the Qing period.<sup>11</sup>

Several elements of these popular-literature illustrations are worth pointing out. First, the faces here tend to lack individuality. Both heroine and hero, both Yingying and Zhang Sheng, have virtually the same face. Likewise, the settings are generic rather than specific; they are comprised of stock elements to be found elsewhere in popular book illustrations. Like the role types (*jiaose*) of theatrical performance, all individual elements in these pictures—the balustrades, the banana-palm leaves (*bajiao*), the doors, the trees—are drawn from a very limited supply of stock items. This does not mean that they are unattractive, however; this large-format edition is stunning in its beauty. As in this case, many pages could function together as a lengthy narrative-picture presentation of the lovers' parting.

As with expensive albums, known artists, both professional and scholarly painters, might be involved in the production of popular works. The Queens Library exhibition's *Yangzheng tujie* (Illustrations and Explanations on Correct Cultivation), compiled by Jiao Hong (1541–1620) and dated 1594, was illustrated by the famous painter Ding Yunpeng (1547–ca. 1628; see figure 9). Ding also supplied several of the pictures for the collection of ink-block images mentioned previously. Unquestionably those pictures are well drawn, but they lack the individual distinctiveness of paintings recreated or reproduced by Gu Bing in his *Manual of Paintings by Famous Masters*. Instead, the faces tend to look alike, and other elements—carriages, doors, and the like—resemble those in other popular-literature illustrations. If indeed the artist Ding was involved here, he was following the conventions of book illustration rather than trying in any way to reproduce paintings using the woodblock format.<sup>12</sup> I suspect that the repetitiousness of these stock elements discouraged extended viewing by sophisticated readers of this simple moral text.

Probably because of the success of these and similar publishing ventures, block-printed editions of plays and novels having dozens of illustrations were produced in great numbers during the late Ming. One



9. *Yangzheng tujie*, compiled by Jiao Hong, 1594. National Library, Beijing.  
*Visible Traces* catalogue, no. 6, p. 29.

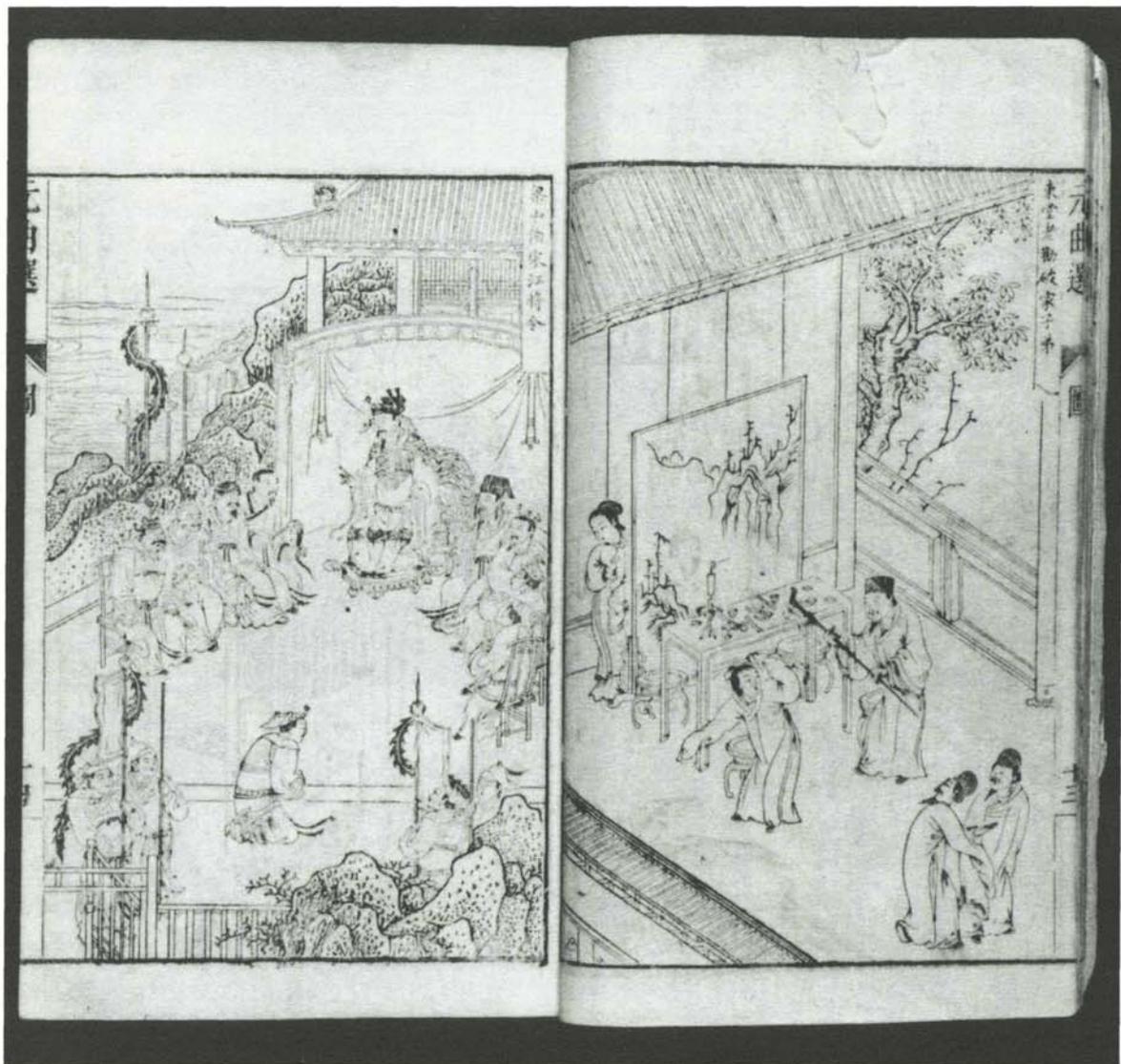
can argue, as I have elsewhere, that the development of the novel form was in part the product of the development of this printing technology: block printing made possible the reproduction of lengthy texts that were both attractive and not prohibitively expensive, especially as standardization facilitated rapid reproduction of rather high-quality images; chances for commercial success attracted publishing houses to seek new—or old—works to produce. Fine editions of plays in the lengthy romance form (*chuanqi*) appeared in great numbers during the early decades of the seventeenth century; virtually all were illustrated. Some of these pictures, such as those produced for Fuchuntang editions (see figure 10), were done in what I consider to be a repetitious, unattractive, and even awkward style. Others, such as *Xinjiaozhu guben Xixiang ji* (The Newly Edited and Annotated Classic Edition of the Western Wing) of 1614 (number 11 in the *Visible Traces* catalogue), are extraordinary in their beauty of execution and richness of artistic detail. Likewise, Zang Maoxun's (1550–1620) famous collection of Yuan-period *zaju* plays, *Yuan qu xuan* (Selected Yuan Dramas, number 13 in the *Visible Traces* catalogue), published in 1615 and 1616 are remarkable, but they are not exceptional; many plays were published during the late-Ming period with illustrations of this quality (see figure 11).

Given their diversity, it hard to generalize about late-Ming editions of plays. Some, like the Fuchuntang series of similar editions of dozens of plays, include notes to explain literary allusions and obscure terms, as if for the benefit of less-well-educated readers.<sup>13</sup> These editions may have been relatively inexpensive. Certainly they seem to me to be relatively unattractive, but then I am personally less impressed by the Jinling style (*Jinling pai*) of illustrating, derived from earlier and even less appealing Fujian styles, than I am by other late-Ming schools. Other publishers produced editions, such as *The Western Wing* and *Selected Yuan Dramas* in the Queens Library exhibit, the illustrations for which were drawn and carved by Anhui artists and craftsmen. These books with Anhui school (*Huipai*) pictures were probably sold at premium prices to book lovers who may have regarded their block prints as highly as their literary content.

An exceptional book from this exhibit, and one that deserves more scholarly attention, is Zheng Zhizhen's (1518–1595) *Xinbian Mulian*



10. The Fuchuntang edition of *Baishe ji* (The White Snake), Nanjing, ca. 1600), Beijing University Library, reprinted from Zhou Wu, *Zhongguo guben xiqu chatu xuan* (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu, 1985), p. 18.



11. *Yuan qu xuan*, compiled by Zang Maoxun, Hangzhou, 1615–1616, National Library, Beijing. *Visible Traces* catalogue, no. 13, p. 59.

*jiumu quanshan xiwen* (New Compilation of the Play Text about Maudgalyayana [Mulian] Rescuing His Mother and Exhorting Her to Goodness, number 5 in the catalogue) dating from 1582. Like the fancier albums and later plays, its illustrations were carved by members of the illustrious Huang family from Huizhou, Huang Ting and Huang Fang. Altogether this play has fifty-seven illustrations, some taking up a single page or half-folio, others taking up two facing pages.<sup>14</sup> But unlike the later Anhui styles of *Selected Yuan Dramas* and the *Western Wing* pictures, these illustrations are decidedly less elegantly drawn. To a degree they preserve something of a simpler, earlier style of book illustration; in their focus on individual characters more than on dramatic action they also set the model for most later illustrations for popular literature.

One of its first pictures reproduces many features of the appearance of a stage during the Ming period: there is a short curtain with decorative ribbons hanging from the ceiling, presumably the front edge of the covered stage; it has a painting in the background, on a folding screen of the sort that could easily serve double duty as the back of the visible stage and the front wall of the dressing room immediately to the rear (see figure 12). The balustrade in the lower right corner of the picture could be nothing other than the barrier that separated actors from audience in the more elaborate permanent stages in temples and palace buildings dating from the Ming.<sup>15</sup> In recreating a stage on the page, this illustration is rare, if not unique, among pictures made to accompany plays. Furthermore, certain characters from this Mulian play are stylized in the manner of religious decorations rather than in the manner becoming conventional for albums and more elegant plays such as *chuanqi* and the edited *zaju* of Zang Maoxun's collection. The clothing of these characters, even their faces, may be represented by large inked areas, quite unlike the use of fine, delicate lines to delineate the faces in more elegant books. Characters are presented with weapons and other accouterments as identified in the play and in religious stories circulating in the oral and written popular traditions. Many are supernatural beings; their backgrounds are obscured and mysterious, an attribute represented by simple cloud patterns rather than by the details of human structures and activities.<sup>16</sup> The role of these pictures seems to be more as aids in identifying these heavenly (and demonic) beings; deprived of context,



12. *Xinbian Mulian jiumu quanshan xiwen*, 1582; National Library Beijing; reprinted from Zhou Wu, ed., *Huipai banhua shi lunji* (Hefei: Anhui renmin chubanshe, 1984), p. 4.

the pictures seem more like religious icons than like scenes representing episodes from the play. One might marvel at their curiosity, but the pictures themselves do not invite extended study.

*Mulian Rescuing His Mother* may be the only example of illustrated popular literature in the Queens Library exhibit that was designed for unsophisticated tastes. The play was one of a sequence of dramatic presentations on the theme of the filial Buddhist monk who saves his mother from the torments of Hell and then helps her to reform. Plays on this theme have been performed for centuries at religious festivals where the audiences were comprised largely of illiterate or poorly educated people; they are probably still being performed today in rural areas, if not in Chinese cities as well.<sup>17</sup> People of all ages would be familiar with the story at least in outline; few educated people would need, or presumably want, to have a well-illustrated text of the play in their personal libraries. From the popular and the religious content of the play—most *chuanqi* plays are purely secular in content—I conclude that this text was seen as having a religious function. It seems to fit with other literary texts dating from around 1600 that focus on religious figures, like the novels by Deng Zhimo (fl. 1600) on Taoist figures and novels on Avalokiteshvara or Guanyin, the Eight Immortals (Baxian), and on one of their number, Han Xiangzi.<sup>18</sup> I suspect these illustrations might have met with two quite dissimilar responses: veneration by the pious on the one hand, and bemused curiosity on the part of the less devout on the other. In either case, these pictures might have been highly regarded, and carefully examined, by at least some of their readers.

#### ALBUMS, MANUALS, AND POPULAR LITERATURE

As I have mentioned, the earliest printed popular narrative literature appeared in a format that divided the page between the upper register, the one-third of the page devoted to the illustration, and the lower two-thirds remaining for text. This format was common through the middle of the Ming period, although it persisted much longer among the Fujian publishers than it did in other publishing centers, especially those in the Jiangnan cities such as Hangzhou and Suzhou. Both novels and plays published there during the second half of the sixteenth century were

increasingly complemented with full page (half-folio) or even double facing-page illustrations. Initially these were scattered through the text, usually a page or two into a chapter for novels, but this practice had limited duration: I suspect that readers simply found it distracting to have their reading interrupted by pictures of scenes yet to be narrated.

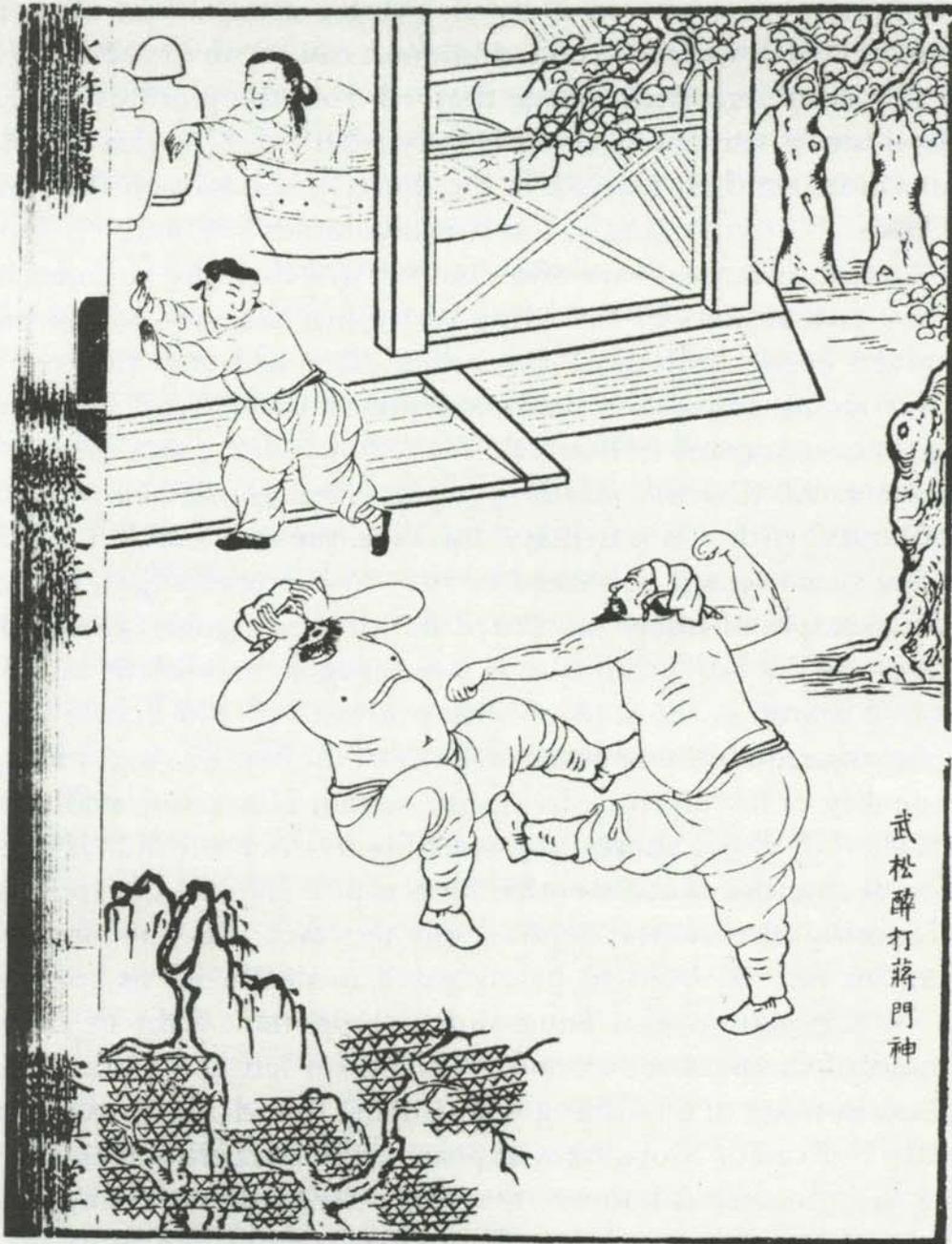
Whatever the reason, from the Wanli era (1580s) onward, illustrations for plays and fiction increasingly appeared clustered before the beginning of the text, sometimes grouped with the several prefaces and introductory commentary in a separate fascicle (*ce*) termed the “head volume” (*shoujuan*). As such, these “capping illustrations” (*quantu*), as they came to be called, function as a virtual picture album prefixed to the narrative, to be appreciated separately and, most likely, in a different way from the story itself. The reader might not be able to reconstruct the plot from these illustrations, but since most were narrative in design, they did suggest the highlights of the tale to be tasted if the reader proceeded to the accompanying text. And many were executed with great skill and precision: the carving of individual illustrations might take several days to complete.<sup>19</sup> Thus the reader could be expected to read these pictures very carefully, as closely as the marginal commentaries might tell him to read the text.<sup>20</sup>

During the late-Ming period most capping illustrations were relatively attractive, and relatively complex artistically. No one would mistake them for fine art of the sort that scholar-amateurs produced in their paintings, of course: most were narrative pictures, and in general their subject matter was “common” as the label “popular fiction” (*tongsu xiaoshuo*) clearly indicated. But when one examines the elements of their content, one finds much that is comparable or even similar to the painting albums and in fact to painting itself. I refer to the elements of polite culture: representations of mountains, trees and bushes, decorative Taihu rocks, plantain-palms and other decorative plants, bamboos, cranes. Likewise, the fact that carvers are regularly named in these fine editions of fiction and drama indicates that they took pride in their work—and that publishers saw a commercial advantage to advertising the names of their artisans (in contrast to professional painters, who generally did not sign their creations). The relationship between the text and the illustrations became problematic during the late Ming, however, when fine

illustrations appeared in editions of poorly carved and formulaic fiction such as the numerous historical novels printed around that time. Given the frequency with which this phenomenon can be observed, I am led to believe that commercial advantage derived from the pictures rather than from the literary texts and, concurrently, that book buyers based their selections more on their interest in the illustrations than on their interest in the fiction. Not surprisingly, the “head volumes” of fiction having fine quality “capping pictures” are often more worn than the volumes having only text—as if readers of the Ming and Qing had viewed the pictures of any given copy many more times than they had read the text itself.

But let us consider a final example to understand what interest pictures that accompany fiction held for seventeenth-century readers and book buyers. *Li Zhuowu xiansheng piping Zhongyi Shuihu zhuan* (The Water Margin with Commentary by Li Zhuowu, number 12 in the *Visible Traces* catalogue), published in 1615 by Rongyutang in Hangzhou, is a good example of finely illustrated fiction (see figure 13).<sup>21</sup> Although the figures in the foreground may be engaged in violent action, the background matter is the stuff of both professional and literati painting. The Rongyutang publishing house was one of the best known in Hangzhou for the quality of its imprints; its Anhui-school illustrators availed themselves of the full visual vocabulary available to the professional painter as well as to decorators of other crafts, such as porcelain and even furniture.

Ignoring the central figures and the fact that the hapless man clutching his face is about to be cudgelled to death, let us consider the setting for this action. Wu Song and his opponent fight in the center foreground of the picture; trees flank them on left and right. The fight takes place in front of a building with pillars, foundations, and steps that are clearly indicated. More trees appear in the background in the upper right of the picture. All these trees have stylized leaves suggested by conventional leaf shapes and gnarly, twisted trunks denoting age; such elements appear as well in the works of professional and even of more scholarly painters during the late Ming; the architectural elements can likewise be found in all levels of paintings of the period. The composition effectively juxtaposes fixed, background elements with the rapid movements of the combatants and of the boy who rushes out of the way. The action captures a moment from the narrative, but the background



13. *Li Zhuowu xiansheng piping Zhongyi Shuihu zhuan*, published in 1615 by Rongyutang in Hangzhou, National Library, Beijing. First illustration for chapter 29, reprinted from *Ming Rongyutang ke Shuihu zhuan tu* (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), p. 29a.

identifies the picture with the greater tradition of decorative illustration of the time. To that extent the picture might be identified as *artistic* if not as art, and, like other complex pictures, it might well merit the reader's extended attention.

In my book *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* I searched for personal connections between the world of the painters and the world of the book illustrators. I traced the efforts of several professional painters who were engaged to some extent in the book trade during the seventeenth century, among them Chen Hongshou (1598–1652). I also examined some of the stock of images (tree trunks, dogs, running horses, gates in walls, furniture) that appear alike in the various paintings and book illustrations of the late Ming. But it was far easier to demonstrate parallels in images than it was to find connections among the people who engaged in both trades. And in fact book illustrators tended to juxtapose these shared elements in pictures for books without any regard for what we might term perspective or even logic: large human figures might be peering over a mountain range supposedly far away from the central action; tiny trees might function as decoration near the feet of the major figures in the composition. To use a linguistic metaphor, it is as if the artisans who drew the pictures knew all the vocabulary of painters, but often did not get the syntax right: the pieces all too frequently do not match in size or weight.<sup>22</sup> How could it be that artists who were quite competent in some regards might fail so miserably in others?

Some answers might be found again in the painting manuals that were produced during the late Ming and early Qing. One of the best known now also circulated most widely in late imperial China: *Jieziyuan huazhuan* (The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting, number 18 in the *Visible Traces* catalogue) of 1701 was comprised of elements and images that had appeared in other manuals over the previous century. Such painting manuals offered reproductions of the painting styles of master artists of the past; they also provided models for all elements that might typically appear in any kind of picture: precisely the architectural structures with their various details, the rocks, the trees, the bushes, the leaf types, the dogs, the horses, the writing desks, the offering tables—the list is very long indeed—that one might also see in illustrations for

popular literature. Students from elite families learned how to paint from manuals such as this; it would appear that workshops producing everything from ceramic pillows and jars to embroidered cushions to illustrated books might have all used such manuals as compendia of models to be copied into their several media. The effect was to produce a surprising degree of unity among the decorative arts, on the one hand, and the elite artistic traditions on the other. Different media shared the same forms and yet held sometimes widely differing separate positions on the continuum of cultural value. The works at the poles of this continuum obviously did not look the same, despite a shared artistic vocabulary.

To explain the world of the arts in late-imperial China, art-historian James Cahill has identified three strata of painters: the commercial artists, the educated professionals, and the literati amateurs. There were many overlaps among these three groups in practice, but these separate status levels became ever more clearly divided after about 1600 and through the Qing period. Commercial artists all learned the craft from masters as apprentices; since many art projects given to professional artists were to be collaborative works, it is hardly surprising that artisans were rather narrowly trained. We know, for example, that some members of a painting workshop might specialize in background details while others might specialize on the figures at the center of the work. Still others, often the master artisans, would fill in the most demanding parts, the facial details that needed to represent reality. This kind of specialization, no matter how efficient it might be, limited the creativity of individual craftsmen—whose names are generally not known.<sup>23</sup> Design apparently was yet a higher level of learning than that of individual elements; one could make progress in that area only by extensive study of whole paintings. Surely the painting manuals provided examples of entire compositions, and surely painters learned from them. It would seem, however, that few book illustrators learned enough in this area, perhaps because they lacked the leisure for study and practice. Consequently, skill at *composition* may have been what effectively separated the educated professionals from the commercial artisans; thus the cultural continuum might be defined in part by distinguishable levels of creativity in design rather than by the appearance of any elements of composition

or even by skill in their reproduction. This might explain, too, why during the Qing period popular literature came to be illustrated only by simply drawn, conventional portraits from which all of these rich, and technically demanding, details had been omitted.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

The Queens Library *Visual Traces* exhibition had only examples of the most outstanding books. Consequently the distance between their illustrations and the best professional art of the time would be relatively small (the Mulian play being the only exception here). But if we were to examine a broader sample of illustrated works of fiction and drama from late imperial China, to say nothing of encyclopedias and other books of practical knowledge, we could perceive the real divisions in the arts; we could see the great cultural and aesthetic distances that separate the fine works of the elite tradition from the more common, artistically less complex, and less attractive pictures in books produced strictly for popular tastes and low book-buying budgets. What, ultimately, we could discern is a clear continuum between those pictures that deserved, and presumably received, extended attention for what one could learn from them, and those illustrations that were so crude as to merit only a passing glance. When during the Qing period popular fiction generally came to be filled with pictures having no artistic value, most of the cultural elite concluded that the art of the educated amateur and the arts for common consumption were utterly separate traditions—and occupations. It is exhibitions such as this, and its magnificent catalogue, that show how closely intertwined the various strands of the world of the arts really were in late imperial China. We can only conclude that during the period of its greatest development, the block-printed book could be a beautiful object, regardless of its content.

#### NOTES

1. See Robert E. Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 74–135, or, for more detail,

- Sören Edgren, ed., *Chinese Rare Books in American Collections* (New York: China Institute in America, 1984), and Tsien Tsuen-hsuei, *Paper and Printing*, in Joseph Needham, ed., *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), vol. 5, pt. 1.
2. I am indebted to Craig Clunas's discussion of these terms; see his *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 112–119.
  3. See Maggie Bickford, "Stirring the Pot of State: The Sung Picture-Book *Mei-Hua Hsi-Shen P'u* and Its Implications for Yuan Scholar-Painting," *Asia Major*, 3rd series 6.2 (1993), pp. 169–225. The entire book was reproduced as *Songke meihua xishen pu*, comp. Song Boren (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1982). For an extended study of the influence of this album, see Bickford's *Ink Plum: The Making of a Chinese Scholar-Painting Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); for a broader study of the political implications of Song-period painting, see Alfreda Murck, *Poetry and Painting in Song China: The Subtle Art of Dissent* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).
  4. See Zhou Wu, ed., *Huipai banhua shi lunji* (Hefei: Anhui renmin chubanshe, 1984), p. 65; selected illustrations can be found as plates 181–183. For information about Gu Bing and his album, see Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality*, pp. 39, 138–148. See also Philip K. Hu, ed., *Visible Traces: Rare Books and Special Collections from the National Library of China* (New York: Queens Borough Public Library; Beijing: National Library of China, 2000), pp. 37–38.
  5. Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality*, pp. 138–148. Clunas makes a great deal of the fact that in reproducing earlier paintings Gu Bing does not recreate any of the owners' seals that cover the binding and even the faces of famous works (see pp. 140, 142). Viewers of his pictures, then, would have a more direct, unmediated view than would those whose attention might be distracted by proofs that others had "consumed" (my term; Clunas discusses the album partially in commercial terms) these paintings before them. See also Clunas, *Art in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 181–182.
  6. Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality*, p. 146. See Clunas's persuasive discussion of this album as a "collection" of historical documents, here paintings, outside time that functions to classify the past more than to exemplify or to recreate it.
  7. See *ibid.*, pp. 172–173; Zhou Wu, *Huipai*, p. 57 and plates 47–55; Clunas, *Art in China*, pp. 183–185. See *Visible Traces*, pp. 39–43.
  8. See Zhou Wu, *Huipai*, pp. 73–74 and plates 327–333; Chang Pide, ed., *Mingdai banhua xuan*, First Collection (Taipei: Guoli Zhongyang tushuguan, 1969), pp. 136–140. For modern blockprinting, see Qi Baishi *huaji*, ed. Rongbaozhai (Beijing: Rongbaozhai, 1952). Xu Beihong's paintings have been reproduced widely, but probably never so successfully as by the craftsmen at the Xu Beihong Museum in Beijing. One of the best published collections of his work is *Jo Hikō kaigaten* (Tokyo: Yomiuri Shimbun and Seibu Museum of Art, 1988).
  9. For illustrations of the *Qipu*, see Zhou Wu, *Huipai*, p. 66 and plates 203, 1–6. In Zhou Wu, ed., *Jinling gu banhua* (Nanjing: Jiangsu meishu chubanshe,

- 1993), Zhou Wu lists other Huancuitang imprints as having been produced in Nanjing (Jinling). Clearly the illustrations were all drawn in the Anhui style, and Wang was an Anhui native. The location of his printing establishment, probably his studio after all, is harder to establish. See *Visible Traces*, pp. 44–51.
10. A modern reprint of this play is *Mingkan xixiang ji quantu* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1983). For a study of its illustrations, see Yao Dajun, “The Pleasure of Reading Drama,” in Wang Shifu, *The Moon and the Zither: The Story of the Western Wing*, ed. and trans. Stephen H. West and Wilt L. Idema (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 437–468; most of the illustrations from this earliest Ming edition are reproduced there.
  11. On the declining fortunes of narrative painting among the elite during the Ming period, see Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality*, esp. p. 181; he lists more prestigious subjects of that time (bamboo, boulders, mountains, branches, and the like) on pp. 18–20.
  12. See Zhou Wu, *Huipai*, p. 55, with illustrations on plates 23–24; *Visible Traces*, pp. 29–31; and Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality*, p. 39. On albums and their function as models for illustrators as well as for painters, see Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction*, pp. 255–270.
  13. Scarlett Jang, “Form, Content, and Audience: A Common Theme in Painting and Woodblock-printed Books of the Ming Dynasty,” *Ars Orientalis* 27 (1998), pp. 1–26.
  14. For information concerning this edition, see Zhou Wu, *Huipai*, p. 54; he reproduces three illustrations from this edition in plates 12–13. Sun Kaidi, *Xiqu xiaoshuo shulu jieti* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1990), pp. 291–292, quotes the prefatory material to the play which states that it was printed to meet the demand for it from far and near. Its author, a failed scholar, supposedly made this common entertainment more elegant. In fact, Sun points out, the language of both arias and dialogue is crude, and some sections contain rather low humor. The interest of this edition, he postulates, lies in its being the largest printed collection of Mulian materials. This conclusion is consonant with the illustrations having been printed to attract broad, rather than discriminating, buyers; the dramatist, an Anhui man, surely had access to more talented craftsmen had he chosen to engage them.
  15. See, for example, the photographs of stages between pp. 486 and 487 in the *Xiqu quyī* volume of *Zhongguo dabaikē quanshu* (Beijing and Shanghai: Zhongguo dabaikē quanshu chubanshe, 1983). Most early stages had hanging scrolls as backdrops; see the illustration facing p. 39 and those between pp. 102 and 103. For an excellent study of the manifold meanings of screens, see Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Zhou Wu regards this edition as a watershed in Anhui-school illustrations, which were to become far more detailed subsequently. See Zhou Wu, *Zhongguo guben xiqu chatu xuan* (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 1985), p. 108; for a representative illustration, see pp. 108–109. For art historians’ slightly different perspectives on the

- relationship between the appearance of stage performance and that in printed play illustrations, see Jang, esp. pp. 14–15; and Kathlyn Maurean Liscomb, “Li Bai, a Hero among Poets, in the Visual, Dramatic, and Literary Arts of China,” *Art Bulletin* 81.3 (1999), esp. pp. 374–375, 377–378.
16. See *Visible Traces*, p. 28, figure 5.
  17. See essays by Kenneth Dean, Ch’iu K’un-liang, Kristofer Schipper, and Gary Seaman in David Johnson, ed., *Ritual Opera, Operatic Ritual: “Mu-lien Rescues His Mother” in Chinese Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1989); see also the extensive bibliography of relevant writings published as *Chinese Mulian Plays: Resources for Ritual and Performance*, ed. Fei Peng and Gary Seaman (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Ethnographics Press, 1994).
  18. See Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction*, pp. 35–36, for a list of Deng Zhimo’s novels and other writings.
  19. See *ibid.*, p. 198, in reference to the poetry collection *Qinglou yunyu guangji* (An Expanded Collection of Rhymes from the Courtesan’s Quarters), ed. Fang Wu (fl. 1600–1620) of 1631.
  20. On the role of commentary in reading popular literature, see David L. Rolston, ed., *How to Read the Chinese Novel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), and Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary: Reading and Writing between the Lines* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
  21. In the reproduction of these illustrations in Zhonghua shuju Shanghai bianjiso, ed., *Ming Rongyutang ke Shuihu zhuan tu* (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), “Chuban shuoming,” p. 1, it is pointed out that in the original edition the illustrations appeared separately, two at the head of each chapter, and not grouped into a *shoujuan* as in other editions of novels.
  22. Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction*, pp. 267–268. For an extended discussion of the role of models in the production of the commercial arts and for other purposes, see Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), esp. pp. 202–203.
  23. See Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction*, pp. 268–289, for historical examples and extended references to art historians’ comments on the social levels of artists during the Ming and Qing periods. I refer to James Cahill, “Tang Yin and Wen Zhengming as Artist Types: A Reconsideration,” *Artibus Asiae* 53.1–2 (1993), pp. 228–248.

## GLOSSARY

Baishhe ji 白蛇記  
 bajiao 芭蕉  
 Baxian 八仙

ce 冊  
 Chan 禪  
 Cheng Dayue 程大約

- Cheng shi moyuan* 程氏墨苑  
*Chen Hongshou* 陳洪綬  
*chuanqi* 傳奇  
*Deng Zhimo* 鄧志謨  
*Ding Yunpeng* 丁雲鵬  
*du* 讀  
*Duhua lu* 讀畫錄  
*Fang Wu* 方悟  
*Fuchuntang* 富春堂  
*guan* 觀  
*guancha* 觀察  
*quantu* 冠圖  
*Guanyin* 觀音  
*Gu Bing* 顧炳  
*Gu shi huapu* 顧氏畫譜  
*Han Xiangzi* 韓湘子  
*Huancuitang* 環翠堂  
*Huang Bang* 黃鎊  
*Huang Ting* 黃筌  
*Huang Yingzu* 黃應組  
*hudiezhuang* 蝴蝶裝  
*Huipai* 徽派  
*Hu Zhengyan* 胡正言  
*Jiao Hong* 焦竑  
*jiaose* 腳色  
*Jieziyuan huazhuan* 芥子園畫傳  
*Jin'gang bore boluomi jing*  
 金剛般若波羅密經  
*Jinling pai* 金陵派  
*kan* 看  
*Lidai minggong huapu* 歷代名公畫譜  
*Liu Guangxin* 劉光信  
*Li Zhuowu xiansheng piping Zhongyi Shuihu*  
*zhuan* 李卓吾先生批評忠義水滸傳  
*Meihua xishen pu* 梅花喜神譜  
*Mingdai banhua xuan* 明代版畫選  
*Qi Baishi* 齊白石  
*Qinglou yunyu guangji* 青樓韻語廣集  
*Qiu Ying* 仇英  
*quanxiang pinghua* 全相平話  
*Quanxiang pinghua Sanguo zhi*  
 全相平話三國志  
*Rongbaozhai* 榮寶齋  
*Rongyutang* 容與堂  
*shangtu xiawen* 上圖下文  
*Shizhu zhai shuhua pu* 十竹齋書畫譜  
*shoujuan* 首卷  
*Song Boren* 宋伯仁  
*taose yinshua* 套色印刷  
*tongsu xiaoshuo* 通俗小說  
*Wang Dexin* 王德信  
*Wang Shifu* 王實甫  
*Wang Tingna* 汪廷訥  
*Wu Song* 武松  
*xikan* 細看  
*Xinbian Mulian jiumu quanshan xiwen*  
 新編目連救母勸善戲文  
*Xinjiaozhu guben Xixiang ji*  
 新校注古本西廂記  
*Xinkan qimiao quanxiang zhushi Xixiang ji*  
 新刊奇妙全相註釋西廂記  
*Xiqu quyī* 戲曲曲藝  
*xisi* 細思  
*Xixiang ji* 西廂記  
*Xu Beihong* 徐悲鴻  
*Yangzheng tujie* 養正圖解  
*Yingying* 鶯鶯  
*Yuan qu xuan* 元曲選

*Yuan Zhizhiben quanxiang pinghua Sanguo zhi*

元至治本全相平話三國志

zaju 雜劇

Zang Maoxun 臧懋循

Zhang Sheng 張生

Zheng Zhizhen 鄭之珍

zhi guan 止觀

Zhou Liangong 周亮工

*Zuoyin xiangsheng jingding jiejing yi pu*

坐隱先生精定捷徑奕譜