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Murray/Mirror of Morality

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In traditional China, as in many other cultures, the visual representation of stories served as a medium for creating, expressing, disseminating, and affirming cultural values. Starting around the second century BCE, Chinese pictorial art frequently portrayed human beings and deities with some relation to moralizing texts, whether written down or orally transmitted. Eminent artists painted such subjects, historical accounts recorded them, and critics praised them for inspiring viewers to greater moral awareness and attainment. Such pictures are rarely identified as a separate category by premodern writers, who are more likely to classify paintings by subject matter. It is largely due to Western art-historical concepts that "narrative illustration" has become part of the taxonomy of Chinese pictorial art.*

From the late eleventh century onward, influential critics such as Su Shi (1036 – 1101; jinshi [hereafter js] 1057), Mi Fu (1051 – 1107), Deng Chun (fl. mid-12th c.), Tang Hou (fl. early 14th c.), Xia Wenyuan (fl. mid-14th c.), and Dong Qichang (1555 – 1636; js 1589) articulated a more subjective approach to painting that was congenial to scholar-artists seeking to express their own thoughts and feelings in a visual medium.1 According to a long-dominant interpretation of the history of Chinese painting, this "literati" or "scholar-amateur" aesthetic offered such a compelling alternative to more objective modes of painting that the best creative artists turned their efforts toward self-expressive landscape and nature themes.2 Painters and paintings that represented different values were slighted or ignored by the prominent critics, who championed the literati aesthetic. In consequence, all kinds of figure painting, including later narrative illustrations as well as religious icons and commemorative portraits, declined in critical esteem.

* Throughout this book I will use the terms "narrative illustration," "narrative painting," and "narrative representation" interchangeably.

After the eleventh century, practitioners of narrative painting rarely were artists of renown, and most of their names are lost to history, sometimes literally effaced in favor of famous "old masters," whose signatures might be forged to give a work greater cachet.3 Conversely, most of the painters accorded critical acclaim in recent centuries are not known for narrative pictures, which is not to say that they never painted such works.4 Even today, many Chinese and Western scholars tend to regard later narrative paintings and other figural representations as the province of lowbrow professional painters catering to unsophisticated tastes.

Although traditional Chinese critical assessments of the various genres of painting have their own validity, a dismissive view of later narrative illustration obscures its considerable social and political significance. Among other things the medium was congenial for promoting or affirming Confucian morality, a configuration of social and political values accepted at least nominally throughout Chinese society by the late Ming period. Many themes to pictorialize were selected from history, literature, and contemporary events by emperors, officials, scholars, and others, who used pictures in dealing with their concerns about such issues as political legitimacy and governance, social harmony (or disorder), group solidarity, and personal morality. Despite a critical discourse that relegated pictorial images to the humble role of instructing nonelite audiences of "stupid men and women" (yufu yufu), ample evidence suggests that many members of the literate elite also valued visual representation. Intriguing parallels can be drawn with Christian images in the West, which were conventionally called the "bible of the illiterate" but served other important functions as well.5

In the late imperial period, eminent officials and literati still sponsored, collected, or favorably commented on narrative illustrations of morally uplifting or culturally prestigious subjects. Oc-
casionally their comments suggest an explicit rejection of the values espoused by more sophisticated connoisseurs. For example, the renowned Hanlin academician Zhuang Chang (1437–1499; js 1466) wrote a colophon in 1495 for the handscroll Illustrated Stories of Parental Love and Filial Piety (Cixiao gushi tu), purportedly by Li Gonglin (c.1049 – 1106; js 1070).6 Focusing on the familial virtues treated in the eight scenes, Zhuang praised the scroll’s presentation of “correct models” and expressed indignation that the preceding colophon, by Zhao Mengfu (1254 – 1322), had discussed only Li Gonglin’s artistry and Zhao’s response to it.

Even in the late Ming period, when aesthetic preoccupations so thoroughly dominated colophon discourse, some writers criticized the prevailing convention of describing paintings as evocations of favored Song and Yuan literati masters. In a colophon on Lin Zihuan’s (14th c.) Illustrations of the Odes of Bin (Binfeng tu), a classic Confucian subject, Gu Ningyuan (c.1585 – after 1645) compared contemporary “connoisseurs” (jianshangjia) unfavorably with Shen Shixing (1535 – 1614; js 1562), an eminent official who had inscribed Lin’s scroll in 1566.6 Gu suggests that because Shen was a “noted practitioner of moral philosophy” (lixue mingjia), he had grasped the true significance of the didactic illustrations, even though he had not deeply investigated the principles of painting.9 For good measure Gu also disparaged contemporary painters who had learned just enough to be able to claim that their works were after Song master so-and-so or Yuan master such-and-such, thereby “cheating ordinary people” (qi suren).

A member of the educated elite might associate himself with pictures of appropriate themes in order to gain a good reputation or become better established within a social network. As Kathryn Liscomb recently observed of illustrious literati who commissioned documentary paintings in the fifteenth century, such patronage might serve various purposes, such as “self-promotion, defining elite identity, and promoting ‘inter-elite solidarity.’”10 Her research on the profusion of illustrations of a possibly apocryphal incident, in which the great Tang poet Li Bai (701 – 762) humiliated a powerful court eunuch by forcing him to pull Li’s boots off, shows how a multivalent theme could serve several functions in literati culture of the Song through late Qing periods.11 Among other uses, the boot story was an appropriate subject for paintings and other objects given as gifts to aspiring poets, as well as to talented men whose careers had been thwarted by petty men at court. Representations of this and related anecdotes on stage, as well as in the decorative arts, also made Li Bai’s persona familiar to nonelite and even illiterate viewers. All too acquainted with predations by rogue authorities, popular audiences particularly relished the spectacle of a talented poet mortifying an illegitimate strongman.

Scarlett Jang has found a surge in sixteenth-century literary and visual depictions of poor scholars who overcame great obstacles to pass the civil service examinations and achieve office.12 The popularity of these representations coincided with a shift in the official recruitment system to emphasize merit-based examinations on the Confucian canon, rather than recommendations based on a candidate’s character and connections. Comparing allusive paintings by the educated Suzhou professional artist Xie Shichen (1487 – c.1560) with anonymous and more plainly expository woodblock prints of several decades later, Jang concludes that there were “varying degrees of visual sophistication within the same social class.”13 Xie’s luxuriantly painted hanging scrolls matched the poor scholars with landscapes of the four seasons, whose brief titles alluded to contemporary dramas about the men’s tribulations and ultimate success, while the woodblock-printed pictures recapitulated and explained events in the plays. The contrast between allusiveness and exposition in these works suggests that their intended audiences had different tastes and levels of cultural knowledge, but shared an interest in attaining official power and prestige through the examination system. Some viewers might well have experienced its ardors firsthand, while others might only have aspired to make the attempt.

Cédric Laurent also has argued that highly literate viewers in sixteenth-century Suzhou appreciated a kind of pictorial narrative that required them to recognize poetic allusions and decode visual metaphors.14 He credits Wen Zhengming (1470 – 1559), Suzhou’s most eminent artist, with inspiring a revival of interest in a long-dormant Song tradition of literati narrative. After the Suzhou art market churned up an old handscroll purporting to contain Zhao Bosu’s (1124 – 1184) illustration of Su Shi’s “Second Rhapsody on the Red Cliff” (“Chibi houfu”), Wen made a number of freehand as well as faithful copies of it.15 Not only did his students and other Suzhou artists paint many versions of the Red Cliff theme, they also applied its subtle and harmonious integration of story and setting to other subjects. Laurent’s case in point...
is a 1565-dated handscroll, now called *Jade Dew in the Crane Forest* (*Helin yulu*), commissioned by a retired official named Shen Ruizheng (dates unknown) from two members of Wen's circle, Qian Gu (1508 – c.1574) and Peng Nian (1505 – 1566). To accompany Peng's transcription of an autobiographical essay by Luo Dajing (? – c.1252; *js* 1226), called "The Mountains Are Peaceful and the Days Are Long" (*Shanjing richang*), Qian depicted a series of scenes from the life of a cultured hermit, artfully sequenc- ing them within a continuous mountain landscape. Because the painting was addressed to highly educated viewers, he did not illu- strate many of the text's literal details, but conveyed its themes through visual tropes that were based on poetic allusions. Peng's postscript indicates that Shen Ruizheng enjoyed showing the scroll to his guests. Literati viewers not only would have appreci- ated the picture's multilayered references to the cultivated purs- suits of retired gentlemen in times past, they also were likely to make a flattering connection between the work's protagonist and their genteel host.

These case studies briefly reviewed above demonstrate the con- tinuing vitality and variety of Confucian-themed illustrations at all social levels in the late-imperial period. In this book, I will focus on the educated elite, examining how men of high status were involved in making, sponsoring, inscribing, and otherwise using narrative pictures that conveyed or affirmed values associated with Confucian ideology. By connecting literary and picto- rial analyses with specific historical contexts, I will argue for the continuing artistic and cultural significance of narrative repre- sentation and trace changes in its social functions and cultural positions over time.

### The Efficacy of Pictures

From the early dynastic period onward, advocates for pictures repeatedly claimed that images conveyed something that words could not, making them complementary to writing and equal in importance. As the prominent essayist Lu Ji (261 – 303) stated:

> For making things widely known, nothing is greater than words; for preserving their forms, nothing is better than painting.

In an essay entitled "On the Origins of Painting" ("Lun hua zhi yuanliu"), Zhang Yanyuan (fl. 847) constructed a thoughtful history of the relationship between writing and painting, which served as the introduction to his monumental compilation *Record of Famous Paintings of Successive Dynasties* (*Lidai minghua ji*; preface dated 847). Recounting the emergence of writing and painting from initially undifferentiated origins, he wrote:

> The image system had just been created and was still cursory, with nothing to transmit its ideas, and then there was writing; with nothing by which to manifest its forms, and then there was painting.

In a later section of his discussion, he elaborated on this point:

> Records and biographies recount the deeds [of the ancients] but cannot convey their appearances; rhapsodies and odes sing of their beauty but cannot provide their images. The institution of pictures and paintings is the means by which these are added.

The Southern Song scholar Zheng Qiao (1104 – 1162) pursued the complementarity of picture and writing through a series of analogies:

> Picture (tu) is the warp (jing), and writing (shu) is the weft (wei); one warp and one weft are inserted into each other to produce a pattern (wen). Picture is the plant and writing is the animal; one animal and one plant need each other to produce transformation (bianhua). To see the writing but not the picture is [like] hearing a sound but not seeing the form. To see the picture but not the writing is [like] seeing a person but not hearing his words.

Here Zheng describes a mutually reinforcing relationship between text and image, portraying them as separate modes whose combi- nation is essential to convey an idea completely. This endorse- ment introduces a long list of illustrated works with historical, philosophical, or political significance, some of which have extant versions. However, Zheng also implied that pictures could be considered inferior to texts:

> Pictures are very brief (yue), and writing is very extensive (bo). With pictures, one seeks what is easy; with writing, one seeks what is difficult.

In later centuries a bias against images in favor of texts became increasingly prominent in the critical literature. Moreover, by the late Ming, connoisseurs of the rare and elegant were disparag- ing most forms of mimetic representation, perhaps in reaction to
its profusion in contemporary visual culture. The cognoscenti particularly abhorred the idea of being associated with common practices or tastes, such as an appreciation for pictures that told or invoked a story. As Xie Zhaozhi (1567 – 1624; js 1592) observed:

“When women and eunuchs see someone painting, they always say, “What’s the story?” Those who relate such discussions often ridicule these people.”

Although Xie himself had a high regard for didactic illustrations of worthy subjects and deplored the kind of sketchy ink paintings that some literati painters tossed off without much thought, he recognized that most art critics had nothing good to say about narrative representation. The unnamed pundits to whom he refers shared the presumption that women and eunuchs were incapable of truly appreciating fine art. If such benighted viewers expected pictures to tell a story, then narrative painting perfectly suited their taste and obviously was “vulgar.”

One reason why illustration persisted in later centuries despite increasing hostility from critics is that visual representations were thought to be capable of stirring the viewer’s response in the same way that the “real thing” would, so pictures could serve as a means of influencing thoughts and actions. Ming officials who sponsored illustrated biographies of Confucius (Kongzi) asserted that the images would enable their peers and even superiors to “see” the ancient sage in action and be inspired by his example. Grand Secretaries Zhang Juzheng (1525 – 1582; js 1547) and Lü Tiaoyang (1516 – 1580; js 1550) presented the newly enthroned Wanli emperor (r. 1572–1620) with a sumptuous album of annotated pictures/illustrated stories about good and bad rulers from earlier history, entitled The Emperor’s Mirror, Illustrated and Discussed (Dijian tushuo, 1573). In their accompanying memorial they claimed:

“Seeing will arouse feelings; therefore we availed ourselves of images in red-and-blue [i.e., painting]; we only selected the bright and clear, which are easily understood, therefore they will not be rejected as vulgar.”

Anticipating that critics would find their illustrated compendium “vulgar” (lisa), Zhang and Lü proactively defended it by emphasizing the suasive power of images; elsewhere in the memorial, they alluded to the use of pictures for didactic and admonitory purposes in antiquity. Fang Ruhao (17th c.) took a similarly defensive stance in his general guidelines (fanli) to Chanzhen’s Anecdotal History (Chanzhen yishi, c.1625):

Illustrations might seem a childish thing, since the various weighty matters of history are all drawn with words. Yet what cannot be conveyed in words may yet be drawn in pictures.

Such endorsements did not necessarily imply that illustrations merited further appreciation in an aesthetic sense. Even when praised for their efficacy, representational images might not reward extended contemplation. For example, Feng Ruzong’s reading instructions for his Compendium of Models for Women (Nü fan bian, 1603) relegates pictures to a supporting role at best:

“When the images are set up, the idea is complete. When you grasp the idea, you can forget the images.”

While claiming that pictures were important for conveying meaning, Feng believed that they had no other merits.

Late Ming moralists also realized that pictures could be read the wrong way, subverting whatever lofty intention had engendered them. In a 1593-dated commemorative inscription for a pictorial biography of Confucius displayed at the primordial temple in Qufu, Shandong, Shao Yiren (js 1580) suggested that pictures were irrelevant or even misleading for transmitting the Way; instead, it was better to study the Classics. Li Weizhen (1547 – 1616; js 1568) lamented in 1604 that the Wanli emperor often imitated the bad role models in The Emperor’s Mirror, Illustrated and Discussed, rarely the good ones. Indeed, the creative and varied forms of immoral conduct depicted in the cautionary section seem far more engaging than the repetitious scenes of virtuous rulers and diligent officials in the exemplary part. In addition, as Carlitz has noted of late Ming books of illustrated stories about virtuous women, the pictures for instructive texts were made by the same people who illustrated works of drama and fiction, genres for which visually attractive or entertaining images were desirable and appropriate. Viewers who were accustomed to savoring pictures of beautiful women and enjoying depictions of melodramatic conflict brought their viewing habits and expectations to illustrated stories of female virtue. Male viewers in particular might easily ignore the didactic content while looking at portrayals of women defending moral principles in circumstances that sometimes were entertainingly dire. Similarly, apart from a few
emperors who were supposed to learn about proper role models from *The Emperor’s Mirror, Illustrated and Discussed*, most viewers could simply enjoy the compendium as a pictorial history that offered voyeuristic access to the fabled world of palace intrigue. The popularity of ostensibly didactic illustrations suggests that their allure owed more to their ability to provide visual entertainment than to their efficacy for encouraging moral introspection. Moralists may well have had reason to worry that pictures could lead people astray.

Reconstructing the Evolution of Confucian Narrative Illustration

The main purpose of this book is to examine how certain sectors of elite society used narrative illustration in support of Confucian values, and to demonstrate that it was not delegitimized by the rise of the “literati aesthetic.” To put my arguments into proper perspective, I survey the development of visual-narrative traditions in China from their origins in the early imperial period. I begin by considering various ways to define narrative illustration more precisely, then examine methods and conventions that Chinese artists initially used for depicting stories. Despite my focus on pictures that conveyed or affirmed values associated with Confucian ideology, I include some discussion of Buddhist illustration in tracing the development of narrative sequencing techniques and modes of conceptualization, which owed much to the stimulus of Buddhist narrative traditions.

Chapters 2 through 5 survey the history of narrative illustration in China, exploring it as a component of early Chinese pictorial art and tracing the emergence of its classic forms. Iconic portraits that evoked the biography of an exemplary figure and single-scene illustrations of stories that demonstrated the workings of virtue are the main types that became established in the Han period (206 BCE – 220 CE). After the Han, the more discursive narrative techniques and approaches associated with Buddhism expanded the range of conventions, conceptual modes, and compositional structures available for didactic representation. During the Tang dynasty (618 – 907), the most prestigious artists made narrative paintings for the emperor and for the Buddhist and Daoist religious establishments. Much acclaimed by critics, the styles and conventions of Tang narrative illustration became a classical standard. With the emergence of literati theories of painting as a medium of self-expression, however, narrative depictions gradually lost prestige in the critical discourse, although they continued to be produced.

Because I see the Song as a watershed in the history of narrative illustration, I end my chronological survey with this period and turn my attention in Chapters 6 through 8 to several types of pictures that promoted high ideals of conduct for rulers and officials in the Song through Qing periods. Even if later didactic illustrations were insignificant to the critical discourse of art and the most discriminating collectors took little interest in them as objects for delectation, many paintings and prints were made for stories about exemplary individuals and cautionary tales of conduct to avoid. The production of such pictures highlights the fact that some members of the educated elite who were concerned about improving morality and governance believed that pictorial representation had the potential for making a strong impression on viewers and influencing their behavior. Although some writers questioned whether pictures could be as effective as texts for stimulating moral cultivation, particularly among the literate, it is significant that they did not simply dismiss illustrations as aesthetically or formally deficient. Unlike aesthetes, these skeptics took representational images seriously and evaluated them as agents of moral transformation.

Colophons of the late Ming and Qing periods suggest that paintings of well-known narrative subjects also appealed to neophyte collectors. Such works often bore impressive but spurious attributions to famous artists, as well as fake seals and colophons of eminent connoisseurs and literati. Whether forged or genuine, the colophons attached to these pictures typically affirmed the didactic merit of the representations and validated them as works of art. To authenticate the paintings, colophon writers often borrowed the discourse of connoisseurship, recounting the purported artist’s biography, characterizing his painting style, and relating the present work to his larger oeuvre. The combination of accessible, familiar, and often venerable subject matter with such prestige-enhancing documentation suggests that many later narrative paintings were collected by people who believed them to be works of art, with the potential to establish the owner as a person of taste. Although sophisticated connoisseurs would recognize the attributions as false, most people, even scholars, did not have
the opportunity to develop specialized expertise for evaluating painting.

Many narrative illustrations that originated in a genuinely instructive or admonitory context subsequently entered wider circulation, sometimes in significantly altered form. In the late imperial period, such pictures achieved their widest circulation and greatest impact in the medium of woodblock printing. As people of different backgrounds appropriated didactic pictures, the images acquired new meanings, connotations, and functions. For example, the Wanli emperor’s large and sumptuously painted album *The Emperor’s Mirror, Illustrated and Discussed* was quickly reproduced and widely disseminated as a small woodblock-printed book. Some editions circulated among officials and served primarily symbolic purposes, while others were commercially published for the diverse and increasingly numerous consumers of late Ming visual culture. Viewers who were not particularly concerned about morality in statecraft undoubtedly found the illustrations of stories about model rulers and ministers entertaining. Printed illustrations not only offered access to remote people and places, but also spread elite views of history and culture across a broader social spectrum.

The sheer quantity of later narrative Chinese illustration on Confucian themes provides justification enough to study it as a social phenomenon. Furthermore, persuasive arguments can be made for recognizing certain pictures as masterpieces, whose high artistic quality makes them worthy of art-historical investigation. In fact, recent scholarship has already expanded the canon of later Chinese painting beyond the literati tradition, creating a place for great works of narrative illustration. However, I would go a step further and argue for seriously investigating a larger range of pictorial production, not just the exquisite but also the ordinary, and even the crude or cliché. The diversity of later narrative illustration reflects the varied interests and needs of its patrons, collectors, and viewers. To gain insight into the ways that pictures expressed their concerns and functioned as historical agents, we must sometimes suspend our preoccupation with aesthetic excellence and look at a broader spectrum of pictorial works. Taking this approach does not mean that artistic quality is unimportant or irrelevant; rather, it defines the high end of a large and diverse body of visual production. Below this rarified level, however, there are many uplifting or engaging narrative subjects that held considerable appeal for a great variety of viewers. Rather than scorning their interest or using it as a foil to demonstrate the superior taste of sophisticated connoisseurs, we should explore the meanings and significance of such pictures. To begin to address this enormous topic, I examine numerous cases of Confucian narrative illustration whose patronage and reception challenge conventional views concerning the tastes and values of elite, literate men in the late imperial period.