

Woodcut Illustrated Books in Late Imperial China: Visualisations of *A Dream of Red Mansions*

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Lately, studies on the relationship between images and texts have increased exponentially. The reputation of book illustration as a minor art is rapidly being dissipated and images are being accepted as valuable material objects and epistemological cultural artefacts. Their research is extremely important for the evaluation of both images and texts. Therefore, the interaction between visual and textual images, their reception and interpretation have become topics in their own right.

The connection between the art of the book and the method used for its printing has been close in all cultures in the world. The movable metal type in Europe, invented by the German Johannes Gutenberg around 1450, was cheap enough to replace woodblock printing for the reproduction of European texts. Book illustrations, however, were still produced through the woodblock printing method, which remained a major way to produce images in early modern European illustrated works.¹ While acknowledging the generally accepted originality of Gutenberg's invention,² the appearance of Chinese book illustrations, printed textiles and playing cards must have had a great impact on it. Since Chinese culture was regarded as a superior culture, Europeans borrowed some of its elements, at least until the end of the eighteenth century. For example, at the end of the 17th century, Louis XIV (1638–1715) and the Kangxi 康熙 Emperor

¹ Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 78.

² Bi Sheng 畢昇 (990–1051), an unsuccessful scholar hired by a printing house in Hangzhou, developed a printing method with movable type of hardened clay as early as the Northern Song dynasty.

(1654–1722) exchanged gifts that included illustrated books from France and China. Using the examples of East Asian art in circulation in France, artists such as Antoine Watteau (1684–1721), François Boucher (1703–1770) and Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806) painted pictures that attempted to reproduce the Chinese style. Although these paintings were accepted as being faithful, they were created in a European hybrid style that incorporated what was thought to look ‘Chinese’.³

It is really hard to say exactly which Chinese book illustrations first entered Europe. It would be necessary to make an extensive inventory of all Chinese illustrated books stored in European private and public holdings. Since the earliest Chinese book illustration was printed already in the year 868, such an enterprise is bound to require many years of painstaking work. Interestingly, the first book illustration ever recorded was brought to Europe, and is nowadays stored in the British Library. It is the image of Buddha in the Diamond Sutra (*Jin'gang banruo boluomi jing* 金剛般若波羅密經), found in a book in the shrines of Cave 17 at the Dunhuang caves excavation.⁴ This book is perfectly preserved, and the quality of the opening illustration shows an advanced printing technique behind which there must have been a long evolution. It is less crude than any of the European block prints created before the invention of Gutenberg's press.⁵

Over the centuries, woodblock printing in China provided illustrations for manuals, dramas and novels.⁶ By the 16th century, there were printed texts in multiple colours, highly accomplished in the art of combining text and images.⁷ The Chinese technique of producing multiple-coloured woodblock prints was unknown in the West until 1954.⁸ In Europe and Japan, coloured woodcuts were

3 David E. Mungello, *The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500–1800* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 78–79.

4 Robert E. Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 164.

5 Thomas Francis Carter, *The Invention of Printing in China and Its Spread Westward* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1955), 56.

6 William Young Ottley, *An Inquiry into the Origin and Early History of Engraving* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1998).

7 Christopher Reed, »Woodblocks to the Internet: Chinese Printing, Publishing, and Literary Fields in Transition, Circa 1800 to 2008«, in *From Woodblocks to the Internet: Chinese publishing and Print Culture in Transition, circa 1800 to 2008*, ed. by Cynthia Brokaw (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 3–35.

8 Jan Tschichold, »Chinese and Japanese Colour Wood-Block Printing«, *Leonardo* 4,1 (Cambridge, MA, 1971), 75.



Plate 1

*Pages from the 9th Century Diamond Sutra,
the World's Oldest Known Dated Printed Book
and the World's First Book Illustration (from <history.cultural-china.com>).*

normally used for popular prints rather than book illustrations. In China, where the pictorial single-leaf print did not develop until the nineteenth century, the reverse was true. Early colour woodcuts mostly occurred in luxury books about art. Notable examples are the originals of the Ten Bamboo Studio Manual of Painting (*Shizhubuzhai shubhua pu* 十竹齋書畫譜), The Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual (*Jieziyuan huazhuan* 芥子園畫傳) and the Chinese decorated letter, poetry papers and paintings of recent times.⁹ According to Craig Clunas, these manuals as well as other text and images had been reproduced mechanically for centuries and disseminated by a commercialized printing and publishing industry to an audience spread across the entire empire.¹⁰

Unlike Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Ming government did not have any restrictions or censorship to police private commercial publishing.¹¹ In

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 32.

¹¹ Cf. Joseph P. McDermott, *A Social History of the Chinese Book: Books and Literati Culture in Late Imperial China* (Hong Kong University Press, 2006).

the 16th and 17th century, anyone in China with the necessary resources could become a publisher.¹² This expansion of commercial publishing caused the continued decline in the cost of book production. Books gradually became common commodities, whose inexpensive price and availability caused the expansion of the public literary sphere.

According to Kai-wing Chow, there were several new reading audiences in 17th century China: students preparing themselves for examinations, general urban readers and women.¹³ In the late Ming and continuing into the Qing dynasty, the boom in commercial woodblock publishing provided access to texts also to peasants, petty merchants, traders, craftsmen, poor aspiring students and others who had been hitherto excluded from the book culture.¹⁴ These »non-élite« readers mostly enjoyed fictional works in vernacular style as well as dramas and fanciful tales of all sorts. The appreciation by people in low social strata gave rise to the idea, mostly held by literati and scholars, that narrative literature was a non-prestigious genre; unlike in Europe, where vernacular literature became a highly prestigious »vehicle for burgeoning national cultures«.¹⁵

As Chinese vernacular narrative literature explored new possibilities beyond the genres written in classical style, it became even more attractive to a new broad readership. Many books of the vernacular kind included a supporting medium, which helped to communicate a specific contextualized message through elements of illustration. Since illustrations have a strong dramatic and didactic value, the story thus became more enjoyable, exciting and palatable. As a consequence, in the Ming Dynasty the large majority, i.e., 100 out of 135 editions of fictional narrative, were illustrated.¹⁶ Julia Murray in her book *Mirror of Morality* notes that already in the 2nd c. BCE artists frequently portrayed human beings and deities by which they sought to inspire readers to better understanding of the text and »greater moral awareness and attainment«.¹⁷ The first critics and commentators who suggested the didactic importance of

12 Kai-wing Chow, *Publishing, Culture, and Power in Early Modern China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 21.

13 Cynthia Brokaw and Kai-wing Chow, *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 237.

14 Cynthia Brokaw, »Commercial Woodblock Publishing in the Qing (1644–1911) and the Transition to Modern Print Technology«, in Brokaw, *From Woodblocks to the Internet*, 44.

15 Anne Elisabeth McLaren, *Chinese Popular Culture and Ming Chantefables* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 6.

16 Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China*, 141.

17 Julia Murray, *Mirror of Morality: Chinese Narrative Illustration and Confucian Ideology*, (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 1.

narrative illustrations lived in the Ming Dynasty. The scholar and novelist Fang Ruhao 方汝浩 (early 17th c.) in his Editorial Principles to his own novel *Lost History of the True Way* (*Chan zhen yishi* 禪真逸史) noted:

Illustrations seem to be childish, since the weighty historical matters are depicted textually. When words are not sufficient, illustrations take the role. It has been said that there are paintings in poems, and I also claim that there are poems in paintings. Once the reader unrolls this volume, human feelings and material principles, towns and forests, victory and defeat, imperial domains as well as rural houses—all of them will be unfolded before the reader's gaze. The scenery and spirits are lifelike, the excellence in capturing appearances—how could this be mere craftsmanship in carving!¹⁸

The images of »towns and forests, victory and defeat, imperial domains as well as rural houses«, all engage us aesthetically, affect our reading process, expand and challenge our understanding of the text. At the centre of the theoretical discussions about the status of book illustrations there is always the question of the dependence on the visual representation. Some theorists make a strong case for the autonomy of the image as a system of representation, while others decisively argue that the image is always dependent on the text because only words can convey its message. For example, Marian Rothstein who focuses on medieval woodcut book illustrations definitely accords primacy to the written word.¹⁹ On the other hand, Fumiko Togasaki holds the opinion that word and images carry equal weight. She even refuses to categorize the book image by the label »illustration«, because she believes that this indirectly assigns to an inferior status to the picture in relation to the text.²⁰

Three main groups of Chinese book illustrations can be distinguished. Firstly, one in which the main emphasis rests on the pictures and in which the text only plays a subordinate role; for example, composing the one hundred illustrations contained in *A Guide to Capturing a Plum Blossom* (*Meihua xishen pu* 梅花喜神譜) from 1261 representing the slight changes in the plum as it deve-

18 Fang Ruhao 方汝浩, *Chan zhen yishi* 禪真逸史 [Lost History of the True Way], ed. by Qingxi Daoren 清溪道人 (Ji'nan: Qi Lu shushe, 1986), 3-4: 圖像似作兒態，然史中炎涼好醜，辭繪之；辭所不到，圖繪之。昔人云詩中有畫，余亦云畫中有詩。俾觀者展卷，而人情物理、城市山林、勝敗窮通、皇畿野店，無不一覽而盡。其間仿景必真，傳神必肖，可稱寫照妙手，奚徒鉛槧為工。

19 Marian Rothstein, »The Commemorative Images of Amadis de Gaule«, in *The Pictured Word: Word and Image Interactions* 2, ed. by Martin Heusser & al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 99-109.

20 Fumiko Togasaki, »The Assertion of Heterodoxy in Kyoden's Verbal-Visual Texts«, in Heusser & al., *The Pictured Word: Word and Image Interactions* 2, 288.

lops from the earliest sprout to its fullest flower on the branch. Despite the fact that illustrations are accompanied by brief poetic captions, the reader is able to comprehend the message also without reading and understanding the text. According to my categorization, the second group of book illustrations merely depicts the text. The narrative was most often created first and the pictures served either to accentuate the climax of the action or to ease the understanding of especially difficult parts. As will be seen, various sets of illustrations of *A Dream of Red Mansions* fall in this category, such as Illustrated Dream of the Red Chamber (*Xiuxiang Honglou meng* 繡像紅樓夢) and Wang Xilian's Critical Edition of a Dream of the Red Chamber (*Wang Xilian pingben Honglou meng* 王希廉評本紅樓夢). Thirdly, the last group I distinguish, consists of mainly decorative accessories for which the reader finds no explanation in the narrative, because they are having very little to do with the text of the book. All sorts of ornaments belong to this group, for example the illustration of an ornamental bell in *A Supplement to the Journey to the West* (*Xiyou bu* 西遊補) from 1641.

My research focuses on the second group of visual representations that invite the reader to view the text in a different light. These representations generate interest, support the mastery of verbal meaning and engage affective aspects of understanding in the service of memory or comprehension. These book illustrations are often labeled as 'story pictures' (*gushi hua* 故事畫) or 'illustrations that tell events' (*xushi hua* 敘事畫) and are not conceived of as a separate genre of painting. They are often found under other headings such as 'character' or 'figure paintings' (*renwu hua* 人物畫), which are subdivided into more specific types such as 'paintings of beautiful women' (*shinü hua* 仕女畫), 'paintings of peasants' (*tianjia hua* 田家畫), 'paintings of barbarian tribes' (*fanzu hua* 番族畫), 'paintings of ghosts and spirits' (*guishen hua* 鬼神畫) etc. According to A Ying 阿英 (1900–1977),²¹ all of these narrative illustrations trace their origins to the 14th century, when 'plain tales' (*pinghua* 平話) from the Yuan dynasty narrated events of the past. On the basis of illustrations of historical and military figures, they became highly appreciated by various reading audiences. In early editions of plain tales, the top of the double-page folio was devoted to the illustration; the bottom part of the page was devoted to the text. They were believed to help to visualize the narrated events, and also, as some contend, to provide clues for the poor reader. In the 15th century, *pinghua* stories evolved into *cihua* 詞話 stories.²²

21 A Ying 阿英, *Honglou meng banhua ji* 紅樓夢版畫集 [Anthology of Illustrations to *Dream of the Red Chamber*] (Shanghai: Shanghai chuban gongsi, 1955).

22 Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China*, 164–250.

These illustrations, mostly focused on action and moments of great tension in the story line, were positioned in the top half of the page, and were accompanied by Chinese characters written in right-to-left movement, encouraging further reading. In the early sixteenth century, the *cihua* form was replaced by full-page illustrations called *chatu* 插圖, which were interweaved with the text, usually at regular intervals.²³ In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the political and economic stability in China as well as the rise of a new reading audience that was seeking reading materials for entertainment rather than for scholarly or religious purposes caused a wave of *chatu*-style illustrations. Prior to the nineteenth century, more books were likely written, illustrated and published in Chinese than in any other single language.

In order to give a more detailed case study of the Chinese narrative illustration, I shall describe various sets of illustrations found to the mid-18th century Chinese novel *A Dream of the Red Mansions* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢). *A Dream of Red Mansion*, also known as *The Story of the Stone* (*Shitou ji* 石頭記), began its circulation as an anonymous manuscript.²⁴ Handwritten copies of *A Dream of Red Mansions* were then made by readers or their paid scribes, who were most likely minor officials, candidates that failed in their exams or students who wished to earn some silver with their brushes. Even the first official printing of *A Dream of Red Mansions* in 1791 did not prevent readers from creating hand-written copies and then transmitting them as manuscripts. In fact, the more reprints were published during the Jiaqing 嘉慶 (1796–1821) and Daoguang 道光 (1821–51) eras, the more manuscript copies were produced. For anxious readers it was even cheaper to produce a manuscript than to buy a printed book. According to contemporary scholars, there were at least 38 manuscript editions of *A Dream of Red Mansions* in circulation.²⁵ In comparison to medieval European manuscripts that had been often illustrated,—e.g., Gothic manuscript illuminations or decorative initial letters in manuscripts—, there was no tradition of illustrated manuscripts in China.

²³ *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁴ The question of authorship has been resolved by Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) in 1922, when he published his critical study *Honglou meng kaozheng* 紅樓夢考證 in *Hu Shi wencun* 胡適文存 and assigned the authorship to Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (*ming* Zhan 霽 1715–1763?). For more information, see Haun Saussy, »The Age of Attribution: Or, How the Honglou meng Finally Acquired an Author«, *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 25 (2003), 119–132.

²⁵ Feng Qiyong 馮其庸 and Li Xifan 李希凡, *Honglou meng da cidian* 紅樓夢大辭典 [Great Dictionary of *A Dream of Red Mansions*] (Beijing: Wenhua yishu, 1990), 918–932.

The ‘imaginative visualization’ of Cao Xueqin’s 80 chapters was presented only by the verbal elements: the text itself and the added commentaries. The majority of commentaries of the early stage were written by an author naming himself/herself as Red Inkstone (*Zhiyanzhai* 脂硯齋), whose exact identity remains unknown to the present day. It is also not clear whether his penname refers to one person or to several commentators.

In 1791, near the end of the Qianlong 乾隆 reign, and long after Cao Xueqin’s death, Gao E 高鶚 (*ca* 1738–1815) and Cheng Weiyuan 程偉元 (*ca* 1745–1818) printed the first complete edition of *The Story of the Stone*, entitled *The Illustrated Dream of Red Mansions* (*Xiuxiang Honglou meng* 繡像紅樓夢).²⁶ The preface by Cheng Weiyuan reads as follows:

The table of contents lists one hundred and twenty chapters; a complete version must exist somewhere. I searched everywhere, from antiquarian book collectors to piles of old discarded papers, leaving no stone unturned, and over a number of years I managed with difficulty to assemble twenty-odd chapters. Then one day, by a stroke of luck, I acquired ten or so more chapters from a peddler. He only agreed to sell them to me for a high price. On perusing these chapters, I discovered to my great delight that the episodes in them could more or less be dovetailed into those in the other chapters that I had previously collected. But the manuscripts were in a hopeless muddle. With the help of a friend, I carefully edited the material, removing what seemed superfluous and making good any gaps, and then transcribed the whole for publication.²⁷

The story likely completed by Gao E, comprising 120 chapters, focuses on the tragic love of Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉 and Lin Daiyu 林黛玉. The novel starts with an explanation of the origin of a story, saying that when the goddess Nüwa 女媧 mended the broken vault of heaven she left one rock unused, much to the rock’s disappointment. With the help of a Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest, the Stone is born into the Jia 賈 family, which is a cultured and noble clan consisting of two branches: the Ningguo branch (*Ningguofu* 寧國府) and the Rongguo branch (*Rongguofu* 榮國府).

26 According to Cheng Weiyuan’s preface to *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the novel was originally titled *Shitou ji*.

27 John Minford, »Prefaces to the First Chang-Gao Edition«, in Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, 4 vols. (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 4: 385. 然原本目錄百二十卷，爰為竭力搜羅，自藏書家甚至故紙堆中，無不留心。數年以來，僅積有二十余卷。一日，偶於鼓擔上得十余卷，遂重價購之。然漶漫不可收拾，乃同友人細加釐剔，截長補短，鈔成全部，復為鐫板以公同好。(Chinese text retrieved from <shuku.mofcom.gov.cn>, last retrieval Sep 24, 2012).

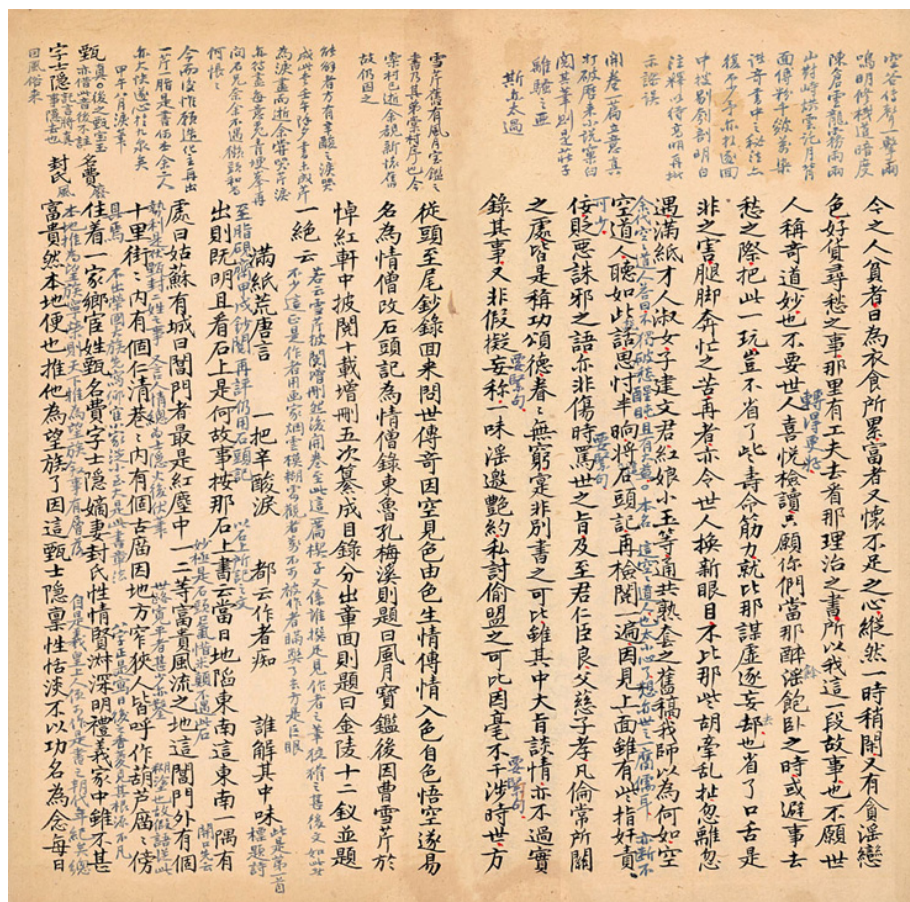


Plate 2

A Page from the 1759 Manuscript of the Novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*
with a Commentary by Zhi Yanzhai (from <pmgs.kongfz.com 孔夫子舊書網).

Before Jia Baoyu's birth, the Stone stayed in the court of the Goddess of Disenchantment (Jinghuan Xianggu 警幻仙姑) and is shown great kindness to the Crimson Pearl Flower by a daily sprinkling of dew. The plant blossoms into a fairy who wants to repay his love with tears if she would join him in world of mortals. Then, she reincarnated as Lin Daiyu, a beautiful relative who comes to live with the Jia family. Jia Baoyu, who was born with a piece of jade in his mouth, is an unusual child who prefers the company of his girl cousins and the maidservants, because to him, pure beauty in the world is found in young girls. Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu love each other. However, their daily meetings end in

misunderstandings and quarrels. Some years later, when Xue Baochai 薛寶釵 moves into the Rongguo mansion, Lin Daiyu regards her as her rival.

In spite of Baoyu's repeated assurances of his love, she feels very insecure and turns into a self-centred neurotic girl with a tendency toward self-destructive behaviour. As she progressively ruins her health by wallowing in self-pity, Xue Baochai replaces her as the preferred candidate as Baoyu's wife. The Jia family marries Baoyu to Xue Baochai, and Lin Daiyu's already precarious health deteriorates rapidly. Heartbroken and unable to forgive, she dies of love and grief.

The Illustrated Dream of Red Mansions of 1791 contained twenty-four woodblock illustrations that were influenced by the 'boundary painting style' (*jiehua* 界畫), of which the main characteristic are very straight and parallel strokes.²⁸ Producing a book illustration most often involved several persons: a designer, a block cutter, a printer and a bookseller.²⁹ Since Cheng Weiyuan was the publisher and bookseller, it was most likely him who decided on a theme and asked the designer to prepare a draft.

The insertion of illustrations was a well-devised way to extend and attract public interest, so the reading audience and the market had to be taken into consideration. The designer drew his design on paper, which was after approval sent to the block carver, who could not digress from the approved design. His cutting skills were very valuable, because the illustrative art in books played an important role in the economic competition between booksellers. Illustrations added a dimension of novelty to a text held in high esteem in public imagination. A book's buyer became part of a larger social construct, participating with other readers in a shared emotional reaction to visualised events and characters of a narrative. Skimming through a book, while naturally paying particular attention to its visual representations, was an exercise that had an immediate effect on a reader. Despite the fact that the illustrations in the Cheng A edition³⁰ were rather crudely executed and quite unattractive if compared to book illustrations published in the Ming dynasty, they are nevertheless to be considered masterpieces in the ways they depict the personalities of the novel's protagonists.

28 Hong Zhenkuai 洪振快, *Honglou meng gubua lu* 紅樓夢古畫錄 [Register of Old Illustrations on *A Dream of the Red Chamber*] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2006), 12.

29 Cf. Marielle Hageman and Marco Mostert, *Reading Images and Texts: Medieval Images and Texts as Forms of Communication* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005).

30 I refer to the 1791 version as the »Cheng A edition« and the 1792 version as the »Cheng B edition«.

All the engravings are thoroughly matching the story. Only the dedicatory poems provided for the first and the last illustrations do not correspond with the plot, but to the assumed core message of the book. For example, the first illustration depicts the stone located in the Great Fable Mountains³¹ in the Land of Illusion. The stone is positioned under the pine tree. Since the pine tree is an evergreen tree that can easily endure severe winters, it symbolizes the stone's longevity, persistence and enduring strength of the stone. The pine tree also symbolizes solitude, which is depicted in a poem placed next to the illustration:

Am I a stone or a precious jade?
Do I have a soul or am I dead?
Have I been here since Heaven and Earth arose?
Leading an idle life, with no avail that only flows?
Unworthy and alone, how could I leave on my own?³²

Twenty-three out of the twenty-four illustrations display the progression of events in 'right-to-left' movement. All Chinese books have been read in this direction, and *A Dream of Red Mansions* was no exception to the rule. Jia Baoyu, Lin Daiyu, Xue Baochai and other protagonists are unambiguously inviting the reader into the story, incidentally enticing him to turn the page on the left. The only exceptions are found in the second illustration, depicting Jia Baoyu and the Goddess of Disenchantment 'walking' towards the introductory poem, and in the twelfth illustration depicting Qiaojie with her servant. Concerning the scene setting in the Cheng A edition, we observe only glimpses of pavilion roofs, hangings, verandas, decorative objects, but never a full view. Although we are observing the pavilions of the Grand View Garden (*Daguan Yuan* 大觀園), we do not get any full interior view of them. Instead, we are offered a limited aspect that does not allow us to see what pavilions look like on the whole. From this we can deduce that landscape elements together with interior decoration are definitely subordinated to the figural representation.

31 'Redologists' have frequently studied the symbolic meaning of the Great Fable Mountains, the Incredible Crag and Greensickness Peak. One of the interpretations points to the fact that »Greensickness Peak« (the *qinggeng* of Qinggengfeng 青更峰) is similar in sound to *qinggen* 情根 which literally means 'the root of love'. Jeannie Jinsheng Yi, *The Dream of the Red Chamber: An Allegory of Love* (Paramus: Homa & Sekey Books, 2004), 47.

32 Translations are my own unless indicated otherwise. 石耶玉耶？頑耶靈耶？乾端坤倪，鑄爾形耶；痴海情天，煉爾神耶；來無始去無終耶，渺渺茫茫，吾安窮耶？



Plate 3

Introductory Illustration from the Cheng A Edition of 1791

(Reproduced from *A Ying* 阿英, *Honglou meng banhua ji* 紅樓夢板畫集).

The picture frame used in the Cheng A edition is very common in Chinese book illustrations. The frame is considered to be a formal element, similar to the proscenium in the theatre. Through this feature the reader takes the role of a spectator in a stationary position, watching one set of characters acting out the play in front of a changing backdrop of pavilions, women's inner quarters and garden settings. For the reader's convenience, all doors, windows and curtains imaginarily removed to afford a better view. This convention is very similar to the Japanese *fukinuki yatai* 吹抜屋台 painting method, which was extensively applied in Japanese narrative hand scroll illustrations. Moreover, the scene settings in the Cheng A edition, which are often set in the Grand View Garden



Plate 4

*The Picture Frame Used in the Cheng A Edition, Portrait of Wang Xifeng from 1791
(Reproduced from A Ying, Honglou meng banhua ji).*

and its pavilions, vary from case to case. Despite the fact that the setting is the same, the engraved subjects on the screen keep changing. Always differently looking bamboo leaves, decorative objects in the inner chambers and embroidered patterns on the draperies of figures' clothes provide numerous proves of that. Through the clever arrangement of the illustrations to the first edition of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the reader was spared the boredom of finding similar scenes repeated with every turn of the page.

In 1792 Cheng Weiyuan printed the second illustrated edition of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the Cheng B edition. In order to preserve the former appearance of the original edition from 1791, illustrations and dedicatory verses were copied from the Cheng A edition.³³ However, as Hong Zhenkuai notes in his Register of Old Illustrations on *A Dream of the Red Chamber*,³⁴ some reprinted Cheng B editions contained only eighteen engraved illustrations as opposed to the full set of twenty-four in the previous edition.

The Cheng A and the Cheng B editions stirred a veritable craze among readers. According to Shi Changyu, they had a particularly profound impact on young people, with »young women weeping, swooning and being driven almost to distraction while reading the poignant love story of Baoyu and Daiyu«.³⁵ In some extreme cases, reading of *A Dream of Red Mansions* may have even led to reader's death.³⁶ The Illustrated Dream of Red Mansions of 1806 that was a manuscript copy of the Cheng A edition simplified and excluded many storylines from the original plot of the story. The illustrated edition of Wang Xilian's Critical Edition of a Dream of Red Mansions from 1832 provided by the public-shing house Shuangqing xianguan 雙清仙館 presents a marked contrast to other books. It contained Wang Xilian's commentaries and sixty-four illustrations of the novel protagonists that were placed at the beginning of the text. In this manner, the book opened with a series of visualised portraits that created a dis-

33 Jing Xuan 靜軒, »Qingdai "Honglou meng" huihua yanjiu« 清代《紅樓夢》繪畫研究 [A Study of Qing Dynasty Illustrations to »A Dream of Red Mansions«], *Honglou meng xuekan* 紅樓夢學刊 4 / 2009, 235–248.

34 Hong Zhenkai, *Hongloumeng gubua lu*, 12.

35 Shi Changyu 石昌渝, »Introduction«, in *A Dream of Red Mansions* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2010), viii.

36 Roland Altenburger, »Fatales Lesen: Berichte über exzessive Lektürepraktiken mit dem Hongloumeng und ihre Bedeutung für eine Geschichte des Lesens in China« [Accounts of Excessive Reading Practices of the Hongloumeng and Their Meaning for a History of Reading in China], in *Aspekte des Lesens in China in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, ed. by Bernhard Führer (Bochum: Projekt, 2005), 192–215.

tinctively lighter and more delicate style than previous woodblock engravings.³⁷ One by one, sixty-four representations of individual figures were accompanied by a flower that carried symbolical significance and verbal descriptions that were derived from *The Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xixiangji* 西廂記).

There are two possible reasons why Wang Xilian's edition included these excerpts from *The Romance of the Western Chamber*. First, when dealing with eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century book illustrations, it can be quite frustrating not to be able to determine who is responsible for choices that were made in the process of illustrating Cao Xueqin's text due to the absence of any surviving evidence. In my opinion, the choices »what to visualize« were most likely suggested by earlier editions, and since *The Romance of the Western Chamber* was the most common illustrated book in late imperial China, engravers could easily copy and re-carve some woodblocks. Secondly, in chapter 23, Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu jointly read *The Western Chamber* under a blossoming tree in the Grand View Garden. The scene setting is very similar to the Buddhist Temple of the Western Chamber, where Cui Yingying 崔鶯鶯 and student Zhang 張生 admire flowers and yearn for love. The excerpts from *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, which are always positioned on the right side of the portrait, are very conducive to understanding the figure's visual representations. Their accessorial nature influences the reader's interpretation and response to the novel's main characters.³⁸

For example, Lin Daiyu's portrait is accompanied by the picture of glossy ganoderma (*lingzhi* 靈芝), a mushroom growing on tree trunks. Unlike other species, it becomes woody and enduring instead of withering away. The symbolism with regard to the character of Lin Daiyu is evident. Lin Daiyu, who was Crimson Pearl Flower before entering the world of mortals, remained in the Land of Illusion, where all beings lived in an immortal state. The glossy ganoderma can survive more than one hundred years, and there are approximately three thousand legends about this plant considering it to be »the plant of

37 Liu Jibao 劉繼保, »Wang Xilian Xinping xiuxiang Honglou meng quanzhuan tanxi« 王希廉《新評繡像紅樓夢全傳》探析 [Analysis of Wang Xilian's Portrait-Illustrated Commentary on »A Dream of Red Chamber«], *Luoyang shifan xueyuan xuebao* 洛陽師範學院學報 4/2007, 61–68.

38 Yang Linxi 楊林夕, »Cong nüxing fuhao dao zhenshi nüren—qingyu shijiao xia Ming Qing zhuming changpian xiaoshuo de nüxing xingxiang« 從女性符號到真實女人——情慾視角下明清著名長篇小說的女性形象 [From Female as Symbol to Women in Reality: Female Images in Famous Ming and Qing Novels under the Perspective of Desire], *Zhanjiang shifan xueyuan xuebao* 湛江師範學院學報 28,4 (2007), 58–62.

immortality». ³⁹ Moreover, The Romance of the Western Chamber's quotation that reads »I am laden with sorrows and maladies« (*duo chou duo bingshen* 多愁多病身) also properly describes the protagonist's nature. In *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, this statement appears in the first volume and describes the pain and lovesickness of student Zhang longing for Cui Yingying. In Wang Xilian's Critical Edition of a Dream of Red Mansions, the same sentence determines Lin Daiyu's repayment of the Stone's love in the world of mortals, where she fulfills her »debt of tears«. Similar connotations can be found in the visual representation of Qin Keqing, an important character in the Jia compound. Qin Keqing, who was adopted from an orphanage and grew up to be an extremely attractive woman, was visually represented by the picture of the Chinese 'flowering crab apple' (*haitang* 海棠). The crab apple indicates a woman's delicate beauty; even the legendary beauty Yang Guifei 楊貴妃, who became a concubine of the Tang Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (685–762), was often named *Haitang nü*. ⁴⁰ Moreover, *haitang* is homonymic to the entrance hall *tang* 堂, which possibly referred to the *tang* of Qin Keqing's inner bedroom, in which Jia Baoyu dreamt of his important visit in to the Land of Illusion, where he gained an opportunity to look at the registers and listen to the song cycle of *A Dream of Red Mansions*. The excerpt from The Romance of the Western Chamber that reads »to meet in dreams« (*meng'er xiang feng* 夢兒相逢) points not only to Jia Baoyu's 'dream travel', but also to Wang Xifeng's dream in chapter thirteen. Qin Keqing's ghost came to Wang Xifeng's and warned her about the irrecoverable downfall of the Jia family.

Another significant example is Yuanchun's portrait, in which the tree peony flower (*mudan* 牡丹) represents the 'king of flowers' (*bua zhong wang* 花中王), a symbol of luxury, fortune and nobility. In Chinese history, many poets in the Tang dynasty admired the peony flower. Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072), the famous statesman and essayist of the Song dynasty, wrote a book exclusively

39 Zheng Xianxing 鄭先興, *Han bua yanjiu: Zhongguo Han bua xue hui di 10 jie nian hui lun wen ji* 漢畫研究：中國漢畫學會第十屆年會論文集 [Research of Han Painting: Collected Essays of the Tenth Chinese Annual Conference on Han Pictorial Art] (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 2006), 40. For more information on flower symbolism, see: Alfred Koehn, »Chinese Flower Symbolism«, *Monumenta Nipponica* 8 (1952), 121–146.

40 Cf. Wolfram Eberhard, *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols. Hidden Symbols in Chinese Life and Thought* (London: Routledge, 1986).



Plate 5

Portrait of Lin Daiyu in Wang Xilian's Pingben Hongloumeng 評本紅樓夢, 1832
(Reproduced from *A Ying, Honglou meng banhua ji*).

about the peony.⁴¹ Just as the peony flower is the leading species in the 'hierarchy of flowers', Jia Yuanchun is a queen among the girls at the imperial court, holding the post of chief secretary of the Phoenix palace with the title of Worthy and Virtuous imperial consort. The corresponding quotation from *The Romance of the Western Chamber* 'a leading beautiful lady' (*yige shinü bantou* 一個仕女班頭) perfectly matches her sublimeness. Similarly, the phrase »a very clever and thoughtful person« (*tui congming tui shasi* 忒聰明忒煞思) matches the character of Jia Tanchun 賈探春. Being an extremely skillful and capable girl, she is able to manage the entire household and all economical affairs of the Rongguo mansion during Wang Xifeng's miscarriage in chapter sixty-one. Despite this achievement, her talent is not appreciated, because she remains in her mother's shadow, who is only a concubine. Jia Tanchun is represented by a lotus flower (*lianhua* 蓮花) whose importance is derived from Buddhism. Although the lotus flower is growing in dirty water, it manages to maintain its purity. The flower is

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

straight, has no branches and smells lovely. Moreover, the homonyms *lian* 連 ('interconnections') and *lian* 戀 ('love') underline Jia Tanchun's happy marriage, which is unfortunately concluded in a faraway place. Although her husband and his family love Jia Tanchun, she misses her family and in her longing becomes a tragic figure. *Li* 離 'separation', therefore stands in contrast to *lian* as it symbolizes another character in *A Dream of Red Mansions*: Li Wan 李纨, who is a young widow in her late twenties. She is displayed with a 'pear blossom' (*libua* 梨花). The corresponding line from The Romance of the Western Chamber, »I am mourning in a dress of pure white« (*chuan yi tao gaosu yishang* 穿一套縞素衣裳) captures her situation of a proper Confucian widow that wastes her youth by accepting and following the strict standards of behaviour stipulated by the Confucian code of ritually correct conduct.

By fusing text and image in Cheng Weiyuan's and Wang Xilian's edition, the woodcut-illustrated *Dream of Red Mansions* did definitely not engage in the dialogue between the vulgar and merely decorative arts, as scholars in the Qing dynasty believed. On the contrary, they engage in the dialogue between the fine arts and should therefore be integrated in studies on medieval book illustration. Although the illustrations of *A Dream of Red Mansions* are subordinated to the text, there is an inner coherence and integrity throughout the entire set of illustrations, which is a remarkable achievement in Chinese book illustration. Since the reading of the illustrated love story of Jia Baoyu is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit, the reader is stimulated to visualize the "world" of the novel. The illustrations give him both pleasure and easily accessible information. Moreover, his response to any given scene setting derives from his position as a spectator, and this perspective evokes various emotional states. The medium of woodcut illustrations of Cao Xueqin's *Dream of Red Mansions* also helped, to some extent, to achieve an end which every book must aspire—it was certain to be read. After 1836, *A Dream of Red Mansions* has been adapted by other woodcut engravers, and later on, it was discovered by painters some of whom have offered us brilliant, almost encyclopaedic descriptions of daily life and the sophisticated material culture of the elite class in the Qing Dynasty. Therefore, illustrations on *A Dream of Red Mansions* deserve further study and more attention than they have received up to the present day.

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