

Through a Forest of Chancellors



Fugitive
Histories in
Liu Yuan's
Lingyan ge,
an Illustrated
Book from
Seventeenth-
Century
Suzhou



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Anne Burkus-Chasson

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Only the rereading counts, Nabokov said.

—Michael Ondaatje, *Divisadero*

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For

Timothy and Lola

And in Loving Memory of

Haruko and Sambuco

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Through
a Forest of
Chancellors



Fugitive
Histories in
Liu Yuan's
Lingyan ge,
an Illustrated
Book from
Seventeenth-
Century
Suzhou



Introduction

WOODBLOCK-PRINTED BOOKS WERE commonplace objects in the southeastern cities of China during the mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. After suffering a remarkable decline in the fourteenth century, the publishing industry burgeoned during this historical period as the price of paper dropped and woodblock-carving techniques became standardized.¹ The increased consumption of paper alone is considered a factor in the contemporary development of cities and the enhanced prosperity of their citizenry. Bibliophiles turned to printed books rather than manuscripts, even though authors still circulated their work among readers in manuscript and commoners still depended on copying books by hand while pursuing their studies. Book boats (*shuchuan* 書船) that traveled the waterways of southeastern cities increased the circulation of printed books, while the publications of the Suzhou and Nanjing print shops dominated bookstalls and stores. Clearly, the ubiquity of books was supported by a significant number of buyers and readers, who were increasingly found among city-dwellers and wealthy merchants. They, too, contributed to the transformation of the publishing industry during this historical era.

Even the most casual fanning of the leaves of books published during the mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries will reveal a surprising feature. Appealing visual effects, such as multicolored marginalia and exquisitely detailed narrative illustration, distinguished many publications. Pictorial images appear in works of fiction, encyclopedias, books on science and technology, works of philosophy and history, as well as the collected writings of famous men. These images ranged from the diagrammatic to the representational. Some were hastily carved on a single woodblock, whereas others were carefully executed by families of carvers who were highly trained in the use of knife and gouge. Lavish collections of painting and calligraphy, often printed in color, required the use of multiple blocks. Despite its expense, illustration resulted in the elevation of the print as a new object of aesthetic appreciation, and might be taken as a distinguishing characteristic of bookmaking practices of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Further, during this period printed images were most commonly found in association with the printed word. Yet editors still often felt a need to justify the inclusion of

pictorial imagery within the book. At times, the tone of the editorial commentary was defensive; at other times, it was apologetic. The uncertainty that surrounded the juxtaposition of word and image is apparent in the variety of editorial conventions that governed the positioning of the picture within the book. Some publishers, disturbing the continuity of the verbal text, interspersed illustration throughout the book. Others confined it to a horizontal register running across the top of each leaf above the text. Still others separated the text entirely from the image, gathering the illustrations at the front of the book and limiting the immediate verbal context of the image to brief captions. Such conventions of assembling the book and formatting the leaf betray efforts to determine, or to control, the relationship between the pictorial image and the accompanying written text. In the end, seventeenth-century editors never settled the problem of the compatibility of the image and the word.²

Today, it is a common practice to isolate the printed illustrations in traditional Chinese books from their verbal text. Museum exhibitions of printed books tend to display the illustrated leaves of a book to celebrate the artistic design and carving of the pictorial image. Presented as purely aesthetic objects, the illustrated leaves are burdened with little more than a scant title. The significance of the picture's initial association with an act of writing and its subsequent positioning within the leaves of a book are suppressed. The same might be said of the art history of Chinese printed illustration. In recent years, the publication of numerous compilations reproducing rare printed illustrations has facilitated research on the printed book.³ Nonetheless, the radical separation of the pictorial image from its verbal context limits an understanding of the illustration as much as it limits an understanding of the absent text. The dynamic of the relationship between word and image is diffused. The excision of the illustration from the verbal text further eliminates the tension that traditional Chinese readers and editors found in the juxtaposition of word and image. Perhaps the verbal framing of the printed image in traditional Chinese books has become invisible, so accustomed are modern readers to seeing the image enclosed by words on a page, particularly in the case of photographic illustration. Nonetheless, the elimination of the verbal frame isolates the illustration and creates an altered visual experience.

It is my intention to resituate the seventeenth-century printed illustration within its textual environment. My endeavor is inspired by the writings of D. F. McKenzie, who, in advocating a "sociology of texts," embraced the historical study of a book's production, transmission, and consumption and argued that "the material forms of books, the non-verbal elements of the typographical notations within them, the very disposition of space itself, have an expressive function in conveying meaning."⁴ How the illustrated book in particular is rendered present to a reader inevitably involves an analysis not only of how the pictorial image is physically positioned within the verbal text but also of the meaning generated by the juxtaposition of the image and the word.

During the course of working on this project, I have become convinced that the proliferation during the seventeenth century of pictorial imagery within printed books indicates a general epistemological shift of interest toward visual forms of knowledge. In other words, the printed image of the seventeenth century participates in what some have called a particular, historically specific, form of visuality. The very ubiquity of illustrated books in Chinese society during this historical period may be seen as evidencing new habits of seeing. And yet, as I have already indicated,

the illustrated book was an object of contention. It appeared at a liminal moment, a moment of remarkable instability, during which the activities of looking at the pictorial image and of reading the written text were in conflict. In my view, the ties of the illustration with writing, the text, and the leaf in that period cannot be ignored. And yet, in the midst of a plethora of printed imagery, the illustrated book was considered a vanity, a confection, whose pictorial effects threatened textual significance and whose shapes intruded upon the format of the leaf.

Admittedly, illustrations are in themselves ambiguous. Although they are associated with an act of writing, the nature of their relationship to the content of the text is always unclear. Indeed, the power of an image to disrupt or contradict the text it accompanies has been the subject of theoretical debate. As J. Hillis Miller has queried, “Is there a mode of meaning specific to the graphic image, exceeding, supplementing or lying beside any meaning that can be expressed in words, therefore irreducible to any words, however eloquent?”⁵ Margaret Iversen, who places the debate about the visual sign within a larger philosophical context, juxtaposes the structuralist position that would emphasize the “coded, discursive aspect” of the image with the post-structuralist position that would emphasize instead its “irreducible figurality.”⁶ The relevance of these questions to traditions of illustration in late imperial China remains to be thoroughly investigated. My goal in this book is far more humble. But I begin my project with the premise that illustration, in general, serves more than a subsidiary function within a book, such as making attractive the printed word or explaining the meaning of the printed word to a less than competent reader.⁷

Many printed books from late Ming and early Qing China forcefully demonstrate the importance of being pictured. But I have chosen to write neither a technical history of printing nor an art history of the illustrated book. Instead, I focus on one book in particular, *Liu Yuan jinghui Lingyan ge* 劉源敬繪凌煙閣 (Liu Yuan respectfully painted Lingyan ge, gallery that skims smoke-like clouds;⁸ henceforth referred to as *Lingyan ge*). The book, which contains only forty-five leaves, was designed by Liu Yuan 劉源 (fl. late seventeenth century) during the 1660s and privately published in 1669 by Tong Pengnian 佟彭年 (*juren* 1651), an officer in the Qing provincial administration. The Lingyan ge of the book’s title was a historical building that housed the portraits of twenty-four vassals of the early Tang court, all of whom had contributed to its establishment and consolidation. The Lingyan ge was thus a political space, one that connoted loyal service to the king. Liu Yuan re-creates the portrait likenesses and supplements them with a series of sacred icons. Six prefaces valorize the book and offer injunctions on how to read it. Very few imprints of the book are extant.⁹ Nonetheless, the intricate, exquisitely carved figures and texts that compose *Lingyan ge* have justly attracted the notice of a number of modern scholars writing technical histories of Chinese print.¹⁰ But to consider only the appearance of *Lingyan ge* invariably leaves a good many questions unanswered, notably who read the book, how the book was read, and why it was printed. Ultimately, what was most unusual about *Lingyan ge* when it appeared was the primary importance of the pictorial image in generating the propositions set forth in the book. Liu Yuan, I will contend, advanced a political and historical argument, and that argument depended on a dialogic and transformative exchange between words and images.

In Part I of this book, I address issues of materiality and look closely at the physical features of thread-bound books such as *Lingyan ge* and their inscribed surfaces, in addition to the shapes of their visual and verbal signifiers. In Part II, I address the historical circumstances surrounding the publication and reception of

Lingyan ge. The issues that I address in the two parts of this book frequently overlap. I do not try to separate the physical properties of *Lingyan ge* from its historical reception; rather, I look at these issues from different perspectives. Finally, I want to acknowledge that the title of my book is adapted from a statement in Liu Yuan's preface to *Lingyan ge*, in which he imagines that his reader-viewer, leafing through the book, will pass through a forest of generals and chancellors. Neither straight nor direct, the passage that Liu Yuan creates is distinguished by hesitations and reversals, unexpected movements I have tried to bring forth rather than set right.