PICTORIAL PRINTING IN CHINESE BOOKS: THREE EXAMPLES FROM THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

YU-YING BROWN

China, the country of origin of both paper and the printed word, was also the first to print book illustrations. However, it is the Japanese achievement in this field that has captured the imagination of the outside world, as was so eloquently and reflectively demonstrated by my colleague David Chibbett, in a comprehensive study published shortly before his sudden death last November.1

There would appear to be four main reasons why the Chinese made such little headway in this field after producing, as early as the ninth century, complex woodblock illustrations of a kind not to be seen in Japan for another three or four centuries.2 Firstly, very few Chinese painters of any note worked with a woodcut in mind, and even those who did seldom saw the book as a vehicle for creative expression. In Japan on the other hand, painters from a whole variety of schools became attracted to this medium. Indeed, nearly all the great masters either turned to book illustration at some stage in their career or else had their work posthumously reproduced in books. Correspondingly, the Chinese hardly ever integrated the arts of design and printing to such delightful effect as did the craftsmen of Japan. Thirdly, during the Edo period in Japan (1603–1867), peace and prosperity brought about something of a consumer society led by a dynamic and assertive urban bourgeoisie, which not only generated an infinite range of themes for book illustration but also created a demand for them. This was particularly evident in the ukiyo-e (pictures of the ‘floating world’) boom in that country, a boom which was to last approximately from 1680 until the Meiji Restoration in 1868. No such milieu can be said to have evolved at any comparable stage in Chinese history, the exquisite urban culture of the Sung and Ming having been much less autonomous and expansive. Lastly, with their proverbial genius for adopting and improving imported culture and technology, the Japanese took over with great enthusiasm the Chinese innovation of printing some book illustrations in multicolour; and they did this not long after its inception in China in the early seventeenth century.3 Contrariwise, the Chinese themselves never popularised colour-printing. Instead, they long reserved it almost entirely for the production of prestige books, about the only exception being the broadsheet prints known as nien-hua, which were good luck posters for the New Year.

Nevertheless, there was one brief era in which the art of book illustration did reach a state of perfection and diversity in China comparable to that achieved in the Japan of 187
the Edo period. The era in question can be set between 1570 and 1670—the late Ming to early Ch'ing period—the Ming dynasty spanning the years 1368 to 1643, and the Ch'ing (or Manchu) those from 1644 to 1911. For the first time do we then see well-known Chinese painters become actively involved in the field of printed book illustration, and thanks to close co-operation by these painters with the blockcutters or engravers, they produced some excellent work—most notably for popular novels and plays, and for albums of human figures and nature studies. Recently, the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books of the British Library had a rare opportunity to acquire three such items. We hope that the descriptive notes of them given below will serve to shed a little extra light on what has thus far remained a relatively unexplored area of Chinese culture.

To begin with the earliest and most significant of these purchases: a copy of the 1610 edition of \textit{P'i-p'a-chi} (translated in the West, somewhat freely, as the \textit{Romance of the Lute} or the \textit{Story of the Guitar}). This is a drama in 42 \textit{hui} or ‘acts’, written by Kao Ming (c. 1320–80), a scholar and minor official of the Yuan dynasty (1280–1367). This edition carries as its full title, \textit{Yuan-pen ch'u-hsiang nan P'i-p'a-chi}; and it was published by Ts'ao I-tu who was Master of the Ch'i-feng-kuan, the Hall of the Rising Phoenix. It was also he who wrote the preface which is dated the 38th year of the reign of Wan-li, 1610. The main text is produced in three \textit{chüan} or fascicles, a fourth \textit{chüan} being devoted entirely to an etymological glossary. In the upper margins are printed critical notes by Wang Shih-chen (1526–90) and Li Chih (1525–1605), two independently-minded scholars who were among the first to appreciate fiction and drama as literature.

The \textit{P'i-p'a-chi}, the theme of which is the filial piety and chastity of a daughter-in-law, has its roots in ancient Chinese folklore, though it also owes something to the Sanskrit story, \textit{Sakuntala}. Its author Kao Ming was said to have written this drama in about 1356 A.D. At all events, it could not have been first published so very much later since its title is listed among the pre-Ming ‘Southern dramas’ in the great encyclopaedia, \textit{Yung-lo ta-tien}, which was compiled between 1403 and 1408. The work in question remained popular in China all through the Ch'ing dynasty; and in addition, became one of the first to be rendered into a European tongue. Indeed, the play actually appeared on Broadway in 1946, with Yul Brynner and Mary Martin (as the son and daughter-in-law respectively) in the lead!

Several other Ming illustrated editions of the \textit{P'i-p'a-chi} are extant, but this one is of special interest. Firstly, it is quite the most copiously illustrated, containing no less than 41 double-page woodcuts. These are finely engraved by Huang I-pin and at least three other prominent members of his family: Huang Ying-jui, Huang I-feng and Huang I-k'ai, all of whose signatures appear among the illustrations. Indeed, this work provides a particularly distinctive example of the intricate and elegant woodcut techniques of these Huang craftsmen, techniques which stand in contrast with the less refined, albeit more robust, style of their predecessors.

The Huang clan had, during the second half of the sixteenth century, been the founders of the Hui-p'ai school of blockcutting, the name being derived from their native province of An-hui. And of course, the fact that they were able to constitute a school, the first in the
Fig. 1. Ts'ai Po-chieh bidding farewell to his bride of a mere two months, before leaving for a civil service examination in the capital, in accordance with the wish of his elderly parents. An illustration from the P' i-p' a-chi (1610). Or. 75. b. 8
Fig. 2. Chao Wu-niang, the loyal wife longing for reunion with her estranged and now prosperous husband. An illustration from the *P'í-p’a-chi* (1610). Or. 75. b. 8

History of Chinese printing to be recognised as such, was itself an indication of their rising status as artisans. Hitherto, in China as in Japan, the engravers had usually been anonymous and had received scant credit for what was, after all, the most critical stage of the printing process. The members of this school were responsible for many of the more celebrated of the Ming illustrated novels and dramas, works that served to crown this golden age of the Chinese tradition of book illustration. Furthermore, they exercised a widespread and profound influence through the end of the Ming and early Ch’ing period, years during which the other two acquisitions described below also originated.

Another singular aspect of this 1610 edition of *P’í-p’a-chi* is its relative scarcity. From his preface the Master of the Ch’í-feng-kuan made it clear that the edition in question was published as a companion to the *Hsi-hsiang-chi* (i.e. the *Romance of the Western Chamber*), a well-known ‘Northern drama’ which he himself had brought out only three months earlier. The latter was illustrated by a contemporary painter by the name of Wang Keng and engraved by Huang I-k’ai, one of the quartet of relations mentioned above. True, the illustrator to the aforesaid *P’í-p’a-chi* is not named. However, if the illustrations of the
Fig. 3. Figure drawn against a minimal background by Ch'en Hung-shou from Ch'ü-tzu shu- chu (1638), showing Ch'ü Yuan, the upright patriot poet, singing while strolling through the countryside. Or. 75. b. 9
Fig. 4. Calligraphic title page from *Ling-yen-ko kung-ch'en t'u-hsiang* (1669).
Or. 75. b. 10
two works are compared in detail from a stylistic point of view, it becomes apparent that in both cases the original drawings were by Wang Keng. He was especially renowned for his drawings of slender human figures and of the geometric patterns used in interior design (figs. 1 and 2). Two of the most eminent Chinese authorities on the history of book illustration have highly praised the Ch'i-feng-kuan edition of Hsi-hsiang-chi. Yet their enthusiastic acclaim of this work makes it all the more remarkable that, despite the fact that the publications are so evidently a pair, the P'i-p'a-chi seems to have escaped their notice completely. Moreover, further enquiry has so far traced only three other surviving copies of this 1610 edition of P'i-p'a-chi, one in Mainland China (the exact location has yet to be determined) and two in Japan. Not many more are likely ever to be discovered.

The recent enrichment of our Department's modest collection of illustrated antiquarian Chinese books has also included the purchase of two other seventeenth-century examples. They are the Ch'u-tz'u shu-chu, dated 1638; and the Ling-yen-ko kung-ch'en t'u-hsiang of 1669. The former is a collection of annotations on the Ch'u-tz'u, the Elegies of the State of Ch'u: one of the Warring States that finally collapsed, after over eight centuries of more or less autonomous existence, with the first unification of China Proper in 221 B.C. The latter is an album of portraits of twenty-four officials meritorious in the founding of the T'ang dynasty (618–686 A.D.).

The Ch'u-tz'u has long been esteemed as classic poetry by Chinese scholars, a work on which countless commentaries and embellishments have been compiled since the first of these elegies were written by the patriot poet Ch'ü Yuan (c. 343–277 B.C.). This being so, the interest of this particular edition lies not so much in the text as in the twelve illustrations which precede it. These were prepared by Ch'en Hung-shou (1598–1652), a noted figure-painter of the late Ming period. According to the preface written by him, Ch'en had his drawings reproduced in memory of his friend Lai Ch'in-chih, the editor of this work. Both Ch'en and Lai were loyal supporters of the Ming dynasty, each in his turn coming to lament deeply its progressive crumbling in the face of the alien Manchu. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that both had sympathy for this poignant theme. The same preface also revealed that the drawings were actually done in 1616, the 19th year of Ch'en's life. This may explain their freshness and simplicity (fig. 3) as compared with the more formalised figure paintings of his later years. Incidentally, most of his paintings are now preserved in the respective National Palace Museums in Peking and Taipei. However, one authenticated example of his landscape painting plus five figure paintings attributed to him are in the British Museum's collection. The blockcutter for the Ch'u-tz'u shu-chu is thought by Chinese authorities to have been Huang Chien-chung, son of Huang I-pin, the principal engraver of the 1610 edition of the above-mentioned P'i-p'a-chi. The whole work was to be reprinted in 1691.

The portrait drawings in the Ling-yen-ko kung-ch'en t'u-hsiang were the work of an artist called Liu Yüan. Each portrait is accompanied by a biographical caption, with a eulogy on the opposite page. These are in the very fine hand of Liu himself, though based on the style of various ancient calligraphers (fig. 4). Interestingly, he paid tribute in his preface to the works of Ch'en Hung-shou and cited him as the fount of his own inspiration. How-
ever, apart from this album very little is known about Liu Yüan. On the other hand, the engraver who cut the blocks for his drawings was a famous craftsman by the name of Chu Kuei. He was to achieve this fame for his engravings of several quite magnificent volumes for the palace, notably Pi-shu shan-chuang shih-t’u (1711), a description of the Emperor’s summer resorts at Jehol; Keng-chih-t’u (1712), sundry scenes of tilling and weaving; and Wan-shou sheng-tien-t’u (1713), a record of the 60th birthday celebration of the Emperor K’ang-hsi. Still, it was due to the skilled artistry displayed in this Ling-yen-ko album that Chu Kuei came to be noticed and was brought to Peking by the Imperial Bureau for Arts and Crafts. He was destined to become one of the favourite artists at the court of K’ang-hsi.

It is clear why copies of those prestigious editions have been acquired by a fair number of major libraries around the world, whereas very few copies of this privately engraved Ling-yen-ko album are extant today. The British Library copy actually came from Tokyo. Once it belonged to Tomioka Tessai (1836–1924), the last of the celebrated artists of the Nanga (or Bunjinga) school, originally evolved by Chinese literati painters out of the ‘Southern’ tradition. So one can observe with delight his big and distinctive seal impressed on the inside cover of the album. This is read as ‘Gazen-an’ which means ‘the hermitage of a Zen painter’.

A further measure of the interest shown in this album by Japanese artists can be seen from the printing of an exact reproduction of it in Japan in 1804. This Japanese facsimile bears the postscripts of Tani Bunchō (1763–1840) and Shen Nan-p’in (active in the early to mid-eighteenth century). Shen, a bird and flower painter skilled in the use of colour, had come to Japan from China in 1731, at the invitation of the officials of Nagasaki. He remained in that city where he was to teach Chinese-style painting to a large circle of pupils until his return home in 1733. Despite the comparative brevity of this stay, and his rather realistic interpretation of his subjects, he seems to have made a lasting impact on several Japanese artists, whose impressionistic style came collectively to be grouped into the Nanga, Maruyama and Shijō schools. Among them was Tani Bunchō, one of the greatest geniuses in the history of Edo-period painting.

A full enquiry into the extent of Chinese influence on book illustration in Japan is beyond the scope of this article. It is sufficient to note that, while the artistic quality of such work in China started to decline from the late seventeenth century, its counterpart in Japan began to flourish in a way never surpassed aesthetically by any country in the world. Not for the first time, Japanese culture was taking over where Chinese was leaving off.

2 One of the most significant discoveries made by Sir Aurel Stein at Tun-huang was a printed copy of the Diamond Sutra which bears a date equivalent to 868 A.D. and is now in the British Library. Not only is this the earliest dated specimen of printing so far found anywhere in the world, but it also contains as a frontispiece to the text the world’s most ancient woodcut.
3 The two early Chinese illustrated works printed in multicolour with multiple blocks, that were most influential in terms of technical and aesthetic impact, were the Shih-chu-chai shu-hua p’u, albums of the Ten Bamboo Studio (1619–1627),
and the Chieh-tzu-yuan hua-chuan, Mustard Seed Garden manual (Vols. 1-4, 1679, 1701, 1701 and 1818 respectively).

4 The term ‘Southern drama’ refers to a lengthy lyrical drama otherwise known as ch‘uan-ch‘i. This categorisation serves to differentiate it from the ‘Northern drama’ or ts‘a-ch‘u, which is more colloquial in dialogue, ‘northern’ in musical tone and much shorter in plot.

5 The earliest European translation of the P‘i-p‘a-chi appears to be Le Pi-pa-ki, ou l’histoire du luth, by Antoine Pierre Louis Bazin (Paris, 1841).


7 (i) P‘i-p‘a-chi t‘ao-lun chuan-k‘an, symposium on the P‘i-p‘a-chi (Peking, Ch‘u-chen yueh-k‘an-sh‘e, 1956), pl. 2.

8 Ch‘u Yuan, a loyal minister of the State of Ch‘u, wrote the poem Li sao (‘Falling into Troubles’) which makes up the primary section in the Ch‘u-ts‘u. It is an allegorical description of the Poet’s yearning for a ruler who will listen to good counsel in government. Alas, the advice he offered to his prince was disregarded. So, in despair, he drowned himself in the Mi-lo river. The modern Dragon-Boat Festival is held in his honour. During it, rice in bamboo tubes is thrown on the water to propitiate his spirit.


10 The composition of figures and background scenes in these three palace editions shows the first use in China of the geometric rules of perspective evolved in the Florentine Renaissance. These had been brought to Peking by European missionaries.

11 Kuo Wei-ch‘u, the author of the Chung-kuo pan-hua shih-lueh, apparently did not see an original copy (op. cit. p. 153). However, a copy formerly in Cheng Chen-to’s library was reproduced in facsimile by Chung-hua shu-ch‘u in the series, Chung-kuo ku-tai pan-hua ts‘ung-k‘an (Peking and Shanghai, 1960).

12 Curiously enough, in this Japanese edition, the artist responsible for the album is said to be, both by Tani Bunchô and by Shen Nan-p‘in, the celebrated Ch‘en Hung-shou, while the name of the lesser known Liu Yuan is not even mentioned!

13 For a detailed account of these schools, see David Chibbett, op. cit. pp. 208–226.
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