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## Intermediary Moments: Framing and Scrolling Devices across Painting, Print and Film in China's Visual Narratives

As an historian of the arts of dynastic China, it is refreshing to be addressing scholars of the 'old world' of prehistory and classical archaeology and up to contemporary times, and to be in the final panel not because this paper deals with one of the West's Others but because it investigates visual storytelling in artistic formats across the latter half of the historical period that began in China around 1500 BCE. This essay is concerned with how social meaning and identity are shaped through the materiality of pictorial artworks and also with some disciplinary questions about topics like mediality. Mindful of present concerns, I explore the mechanisms by which visual narratives were framed and developed in light of the changing media in use in this cultural context, as well as the intelligibility and coherence of these visual narrative devices.

This conference called forth the type of thematic research, ranging widely across received divisions of time and culture and engaged in by an intergenerational cross-section of professionals, that the collective field of art history and archaeology actually needs and I commend the organizers for that.<sup>1</sup> Still, concerning the wider framework for investigation here, there is a conundrum. Researchers are by nature wary of narratives and claims to legitimacy founded on the historical cultures embedded in the modern nation-states. At the same time, they must take seriously these cultural formations especially where the agency of the past in the present may be quite different from that of our European condition. This is the larger problem underpinning this paper.

In disciplinary terms, it is possible to reflect on the development of our concerns. Writing more than half a century ago in 1961, the historian of pre-Columbian

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<sup>1</sup> The experience of Europe-based researchers of the non-West would show that European distinctions between art history and archaeology, as well as between past and present, often dissolve in cultural contexts across Asia and Africa; see my own department's statement along these lines at <https://www.soas.ac.uk/art/> (cited 15 July 2015).

art, George Kubler (1912–1996), was witness to the intellectual shifts from formalism to the iconology of the word to the iconology of form, but, attentive to the phenomenology and materiality of artworks, was still anticipating ‘a history of things that will do justice to both meaning and being, both to the plan and to the fullness of existence, both to the scheme and the thing.’<sup>2</sup> With the waning of ethnography, those more anthropological concerns have in recent years yielded fruitful methods such as the ‘agency of art’, which prompts not just an intercultural mindset but also never relinquishes a primary focus on the critical interpretation of the work of art in all its visuality and materiality.<sup>3</sup> There is also a growing interest in mediality. Both of these interventions form part of the framework of this study.

This essay deals first with the *Admonitions of the Court Instructress* scroll attributed to the figural master Gu Kaizhi (c. 344–c. 406) in the British Museum, a didactic, narrative court painting in the horizontal scroll format from the early medieval period in China. In it, a succession of exemplary figures is wittily configured through recursive layering of visual and didactic themes. Then, this essay turns to deluxe drama illustrations produced in multi-block polychrome xylography in an ‘early modern’ urban context, Min Qiji’s *Story of the Western Wing* (*Xixiang ji*) of 1640, now in Köln, in which the drama is visually narrated by means of framings, shadows, reflections and geometric translations. Finally, it turns to Jia Zhangke’s acclaimed feature film about dysfunctional spousal relationships before the flooding of the Three Gorges dam, *Still Life* (2006), in which local and national epic narratives touch and intertwine through the use of framing devices and motifs from China’s painting tradition and, once again, recursion. Scrolling and framing devices interlace all three of these visual narratives and, in a performative way, also inform the structure of this essay as it unravels along a chronology.

With artworks grouped and ordered in this way, the immediate context for and function of such research would usually be some kind of construction of the field of ‘Chinese art history’ – the defining of boundaries without or sequences within and the like – where of late interest in issues of visual narratives has been growing.<sup>4</sup> An urge to define terms and concepts in and around ‘narrative art’ still obtains, even as more granular research increasingly highlights practices far beyond the traditional mainstream of scholar-painting over the last millennium and the mainstream itself is subject to revisionism.<sup>5</sup> A recent step has been the opening up

<sup>2</sup> Kubler 1962, 126–127, quote on p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Osborne and Tanner 2007.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., McCausland and Hwang 2014, which followed the exhibition McCausland and Ling 2010, mounted at the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. Further exhibitions on Chinese narrative art followed, for example at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

<sup>5</sup> For the latter, see, e.g., Cédric Laurent, ‘Narrative painting viewed as major art in sixteenth-century Suzhou’, in McCausland and Hwang 2014, 141–176. The word narratology

of this sub-field to a continental purview, to take in the notion of narratives in Asia from intercultural and comparative perspectives.<sup>6</sup> Seeing how some of the cultural patterns introduced here relate to the field of visual narratology addressed in this volume is a further widening of the scope, one that also brings critical challenges for visual interpretation. But there is a starting point in the shared framework generated by the conference at which the papers were delivered, one that should enable us to ask related questions and juxtapose cultural iterations judiciously. Experience would suggest that in such projects we do not necessarily find answers to our original questions so much as discover more intense questions.

We begin with the *Admonitions* scroll, or to give it its full historical title, the *Admonitions of the Court Instructress* picture-scroll (*Nüshi zhen tujian*), which illustrates an eponymous poetic memorial to the Western Jin throne by the courtier Zhang Hua (232–300), written in the voice of a lady of imperial harem. The extant painting in ink and colours on silk is probably a fifth- or sixth-century work, possibly a copy, done after pioneering figural master Gu Kaizhi, to whom it has been ascribed by collector-connoisseurs since around 1100.<sup>7</sup> Since then, it has been recognized as extraordinarily fine and likely the earliest extant example of the combined literary arts of poetry, calligraphy and painting. Having been acquired by the British Museum in 1903, it has in the modernist mode, rather been seen as an iconic, founding work of the old-master painting tradition, a framing literally enacted by the removal of the painting section from its most recent (i.e., Manchu imperial, eighteenth-century) handscroll mounting onto a panel.<sup>8</sup> More recently still, in the digital age, it has been envisaged as a pioneering narrative picture-scroll bridging the modal transition from classical didactic art of the early imperial period (from 221 BCE), exemplified by the extensive pictorial suites of bas-relief carvings at the Wu Family Shrine in Shandong Province (mid-second century CE), to the medieval mode of genre painting which emerged following a period of disunion in the reunified Tang (618–907) empire. An elite format for painting which seems to have emerged in the medieval period (there is no earlier material evidence), the handscroll conditioned its own social reception: it had to be unrolled by one person, from right to left and usually on an appropriate surface like a desk or

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emerged with Wu Hung, 'The *Admonitions* Scroll Revisited. Iconology, Narratology, Style, Dating', in McCausland 2003, 89–99.

<sup>6</sup> Green 2013. The only comparative perspective beyond Asia was Dominik Bonatz, 'The Performance of Visual Narratives in Imperial Art. Two Case Studies from Assyria and the Khmer State', 193–214.

<sup>7</sup> There is some consensus about the date and authorship as outlined here. For a recent summation see Fong 2014.

<sup>8</sup> For conservation reasons in about 1916. However, the name 'the *Admonitions* scroll' lingers; see, e.g., McCausland 2003.

table, and any company was limited by space to one or two others. In this sense, its context of reception may be likened to that for the *qin*, a zither played if not for oneself then for one or two (presumptively male) others.<sup>9</sup>

The *Admonitions of the Court Instructress* is one of, if not the earliest surviving masterpiece of painting in this *handscroll* format; its final scene includes a self-acknowledgement whereby the instructress herself is depicted writing on a scroll in the presence of two other court ladies, the scroll she inscribes being the one we also behold (**Fig. 1**). As we will see, this is not the only occasion upon which the painter appears to have inserted, reflexively, an image of the picture-scroll he painted into the painting itself, for a particular effect. In that final scene, the rightward movement of the two court ladies at the very end, i.e., their momentum counter to the right to left direction in which the picture-scroll is opened for viewing, is a very early example of this convention in picture handscrolls whereby the forms at the end of the painting provide a visual cue to the approaching end of the painting, and the imminent need to reverse the direction of scrolling.

The *Admonitions* belongs in a Chinese category known as *gushi hua*, paintings of ancient affairs. These are generally monoscenic paintings recording momentous political events and often have a vignettish quality.<sup>10</sup> It is not my purpose to argue here if this is technically ‘narrative painting’ or not, or delve deeply into text-image relations. Rather, the direction is to explore broader patterns and layers, to wonder where the story in a visual narrative may lie?<sup>11</sup> The extant *Admonitions* painting comprises the last nine of an original twelve scenes painted to illustrate an eponymous poetic memorial composed by the courtier Zhang Hua and presented in 292 CE to the throne of the Western Jin dynasty, one of a number of short-lived regimes of this period of disunion between Han and Tang. As such, the *Admonitions* is exemplary of the canonical role ascribed to painting as the visual repository of memory and wisdom in China’s great tradition of statecraft. In this case, Zhang Hua, adopting the voice of the ‘court instructress’ (literally, ‘female historian’, *nüshi*, an established position at court), was likely motivated to help reform the conduct of women of the imperial harem, some of whom were as powerful as they were venal.

The tone and tenor of the admonitions are exemplified by a passage inscribed and illustrated in the sixth (or third extant) scene (**Fig. 2**), which likens achieving dynastic greatness to masterminding a great public work like piling up earth to form a mountain, while also warning that disaster may be unleashed at any

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the context for elite music played on the zither (*qin*); see DeWoskin 1983.

<sup>10</sup> A quality explored, for example, by the scholar of Chinese poetry Dore Levy, ‘Vignettism in the Poetics of Chinese Narrative Painting’ in Green 2013, 27–40.

<sup>11</sup> McCausland and Huang 2014, especially the ‘Editors’ Introduction’.



Fig. 1: Scene 12, 'The instructress'. Attributed to Gu Kaizhi (c. 344–c. 406; a probable 5th–6th c. copy), *Admonitions of the Court Instructress* picture-scroll. Detail of a former handscroll, mounted on a panel; ink and colours on silk, 348,5 x 25.0 cm. © Trustees of the British Museum.

moment as by a finger resting on a hair-trigger. It is worth noting that the tomb of the First Emperor of Qin (r. 221–210 BCE), the ruler who first unified China under a single if short-lived dynasty (Qin, from which the early modern word China) in 221 BCE ushering in the dynastic period that lasted up to 1911, is a pyramid-shaped mound. As this is not yet excavated, readers may be more familiar with the 6,000 strong terracotta army discovered in one of the satellite pits in the vicinity of the tumulus. Neither Zhang Hua's memorial text of 292 nor the painted illustration of it in the eponymous scroll, which may date to one or two centuries later, represent, in my view, any form of parody of historical exemplars or virtuous conduct but embody deeply self-conscious and often witty and urbane reflections on prevailing values and conduct at court in the medieval period.<sup>12</sup>

The monoscenic format of the *Admonitions*, and also the absence of the opening three scenes, may account for the scroll's having been extensively studied by modern scholars scene by scene, and case by case, to the detriment of more holistic analysis of the picture-scroll as a complete suite of scenes mounted in a scroll in sequence, as I will venture here. The twelve sections may be divided up as follows. Scenes 1–5 illustrate actual royal exemplars from the classical period (first millennium

<sup>12</sup> Here I differ from, e.g., the British Museum webpage for the scroll: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight\\_objects/asia/t/admonitions\\_scroll.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/asia/t/admonitions_scroll.aspx) (cited 29 July 2015).



Fig. 2: Scene 6 (above and continuing below, right), 'The mountain and hunter'; scene 7 (below, left): 'The toilette scene'. Detail of the *Admonitions* scroll. © Trustees of the British Museum.

BCE); scenes 6–11 illustrate abstract principles and values; the final scene is the 'autobiographic' conclusion, as noted, the visual counterpart of a literary convention. The painter, historically taken to be Gu Kaizhi, likewise assumed this quasi-autobiographic voice, arrogating to himself as it were the role of presenting Zhang Hua's text, written in the persona of the warden of the harem, to his

presumed audience of primarily, but not solely, court ladies. For much of its later life the picture-scroll has, however, been kept out of the hands of women by male collector-connoisseurs.

Regarding the development of the whole *in pictures* certain patterns emerge. An example is the interconnectedness of images and themes in scenes 2, 6 and 9. Scene 2 treats a historical exemplar of the late Zhou dynasty. The terse language of the admonition, ‘Consort Fan moved Zhuang: she did not eat fresh gamebirds’, may be unpacked as follows: Lady Fan, by declining to eat the meat of the many freshly slaughtered animals he brought home, moved her husband King (or Prince) Zhuang of Chu (r. 613–591 BCE) to curb his great passion for hunting, and govern justly. The original scene 2 is lost, although the outline may be preserved in a possible twelfth-century copy in the Palace Museum, Beijing, which shows Lady Fan seated before a table pointedly not eating meat. Scene 6, known as the ‘mountain and hunter’ scene, illustrates the abstract tract referred to above with a pyramid-shaped mountain to one side and a hunter aiming a crossbow at his quarry (a tiger, deer or pheasants) on the hills. The text reads, in part:

The sun zeniths then sinks; the moon fills before waning.

Honour is built up like piled earth; yet disaster is released as by a hair trigger.

The mountain stands for earth piled up, an image of hard-won esteem and honour. The sun and moon, both seen full above, represent male and female corresponding to *yang* and *yin* principles respectively, as well as illustrating two different kinds of natural cycle. The sun peaks once a day, while for the moon it is once a month or, figuratively, the emperor (sun) may peak once a day while a woman of his harem (moon) will have a menstrual cycle. Although the text refers to a hair-trigger – catastrophe being said to strike as swiftly as the trigger releases the spring on a crossbow, shooting its bolt – it makes no mention of hunting, and it is the painting that revives the topic of hunting from scene 2. Here, as it were, is King Zhuang from scene 2 out hunting, courting disaster by neglecting state affairs, exemplified by his finger resting on the hair-trigger which would release his arrow. Meantime, squarely in his sight is the iconographic reminder of what he should be doing, namely mobilizing his people and glorifying his mountain of a kingdom. This effect of overlaying, elaborating and interweaving of the *Admonitions* adds droll layers of visual and intellectual complexity, which could also have the serious purpose of revivifying and reinforcing the admonitions for their evidently jaundiced audience of court ladies through the delayed or embedded visual story-telling mechanisms.

Moving along, the painting later reworks this theme to delve even deeper into the psyche of its audience in scene 9, known as the family scene (**Fig. 3**). This tract



Fig. 3: Scene 9, 'The family scene'. Detail of the *Admonitions* scroll. © Trustees of the British Museum.

is about ensuring the harmony, stability and greatness of the royal family through the modest and retiring yet nimble conduct of the women. 'Do not rely on your nobility for the loftiest must fall' and 'model yourself on the smaller stars which avoid going far', the admonition declares. The women of the harem are, in effect, being warned not to aggrandize themselves by monopolizing the emperor's favour but to conform to court practice on receiving this, a domestic system governed by a rota keyed to his sun-like and their moon-like cycles for the procreation of multiple imperial offspring. They are told: 'Liken your hearts to the bush-cricket and so multiply your kind'.

Visual enhancement of themes in the 'Admonitions' text is a significant feature of the *Admonitions* scroll. For example, the text of scene 8, known as the bedroom scene, declared: 'If you depart from principle [in your conduct], even your bedfellow will distrust you' and its illustration had showed the emperor having chosen to visit a consort alone in her bedchamber in the back palace and *not* coupling with her but rather enquiring about awkward matters. In scene 9, the painter once again calls upon a theme established earlier in the sequence in scene 2, and indeed elaborated upon in scene 6, the mountain and hunter scene. Scene 9 transforms the theme visually in its refashioning of the mountain/pyramid shape: in scene 6 it had embodied the challenge of building up honour in contrast with the self-indulgent peregrinations of the hunting emperor. In scene 9, the emperor takes his place at



one corner of the pyramid comprised of figures of various members of the royal family; here the stable pyramid shape embodies the greatness that results from the royal family harmoniously multiplying like crickets, generation after generation.

So what is recursive about this narrative imagery and how does the visual recursion reframe the admonition conveyed in the text or act as what we might call a meta-narrative? An effective way to illustrate how recursion functions in this scene is by reference to the fractal recursion of an isosceles triangle known as Sierpinski's triangle (1915), named after the mathematician (**Fig. 4**). In this transformation, the form can be reduced in scale and repeated within itself ad infinitum.<sup>13</sup> It is a very effective image of a thriving family tree. In the family scene of the *Admonitions* scroll all kinds of fractal recursions operate, as we will explore below, but precursory to these and laying the ground for this set of transformations are the previous appearance of the pyramid form in the mountain scene (scene 6 and possibly scene 2) and the thematic (if not also the visual) occurrence of the theme of the emperor going out hunting as opposed to being gainfully occupied at court (scenes 2 and 6).

The illustration in the family scene comprises various possible readings of fractal recursions. The family group forms the formal shape of a triangle in the picture plane (art-historical jargon for in the plane of the silk surface of the scroll) but also in the ground plane (i.e., in the imaginary, receding plane of the ground which all the figures sit on, but which is not in fact depicted). The triangles in both planes comprise fractal recursions made up of three triangles fitting within the original (at this point, our concern remains within the picture, although another triangle in the ground plane incorporating the actual holder of the scroll is implied). Once on this train of thought, it is also possible to visualise each of the three smaller triangles as being composed of three or so figures: to the right, the emperor and empress and her child who has strayed across to the left; to the left, the two court ladies and their offspring; at the top, the schoolmaster and his two pupils. These fractals enable the beholder to visualise the whole as a single family group that is multiplying but also ranged in small modules in various places in relation to one another by life-stage or activity. Thus, the group at the top is not necessarily in the same room as the emperor, empress and consorts, but conceivably is in another place such as in the palace schoolroom, while the distance of the empress's child from her suggests she and the emperor may be positioned *à deux* for a formal occasion while the children have been carried off to the nursery.

This multiplicity of spatial readings reflects the possibility of multiple temporal readings, to the extent of creating further recursions: narratives within the narrative

<sup>13</sup> A related type of visual recursion known as the Droste effect shows a smaller scale version of the image itself embedded within it. The embedded image also contains an embedded image and so on; illustrated at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Droste\\_effect](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Droste_effect) (cited 30 July 2015).

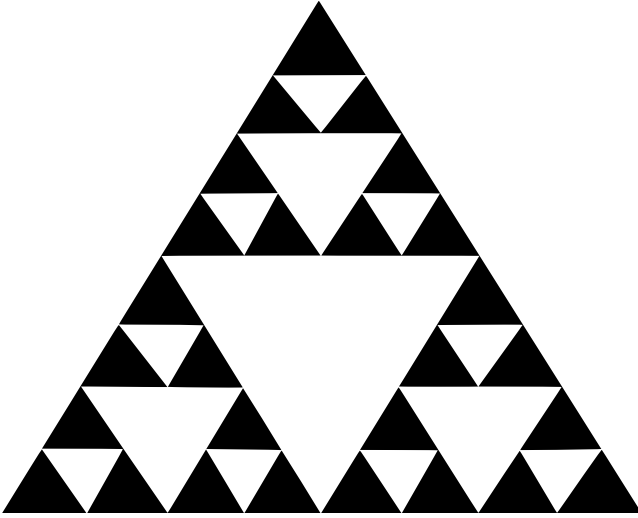


Fig. 4: The Sierpinski triangle.  
Graphic Tian S. Liang.

timeline, adding up to a virtuous circle, or more appropriately triangle of conduct. Below left are the infants and toddlers of nursery age. At the top (or back, depending on the spatial reading), in the schoolroom, a prince and princess sit with their tutor. These could be the same children or others. Below right are the emperor and empress. Now we know why he is here and not out hunting; he is a well tutored, diligent ruler who has been brought up, notionally, within the system described or enshrined here, reaching his zenith each day, just as his women uphold their rota system. Our clockwise reading of the three triangles does not stop here but is restarted via the erotic charge of eye contact between the emperor and the astoundingly beautiful consort seated opposite him. She holds the emperor's gaze in what we may imagine is the prelude to the emperor bestowing his favour upon her, her conceiving and bearing him an heir, and the resulting prince growing up within this virtuous skein to rule after his father.

This erotic charge activates space horizontally across the front of the scene, creating a line of demarcation separating us court ladies/holders, from what happens beyond: this intense line of eye contact is not, or at least not yet, ours. Perpendicular to the line of this erotic charge, crossing the picture plane from without, is the sightline of us viewers, and this is more like the condition of our entry into the royal world of the painting. If finding oneself on the end of that erotic sightline is a goal, then the other axis is our primary route, as court ladies, to achieving it: our sightline leads to the furthest point, to the group diligently assembled in the schoolroom studying a scroll, a scroll which, with little imagination, we may picture as the very scroll we are holding and looking at. The painter has contrived not only to place his own scroll in this illustration, but also to configure the image

in which it is depicted in such a way as to demonstrate where our study of the picture-scroll may ultimately lead: to a beneficent engagement with the emperor.

This degree of complexity embedded within the ostensive simplicity of the pyramidal form enables the painting to comment on its own reception as a material object and to reconstruct its own virtual context within the royal palace of medieval China, a concept known in contemporary art-historical scholarship as *mediality*.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, one could see another virtual triangle in the family scene as the one incorporating the two groups in the front row and handler(s) of the scroll, as just noted in parenthesis. If we can mirror the painting, we can enter its world, as it simultaneously enters ours.<sup>15</sup> The *Admonitions* scroll thus offers profound insights into the intersection of *visuality* and art media, history and ideals of conduct at a moment on the cusp of the historical transition from classical didacticism to medieval genre art: to grasp its complexity is to be rewarded for the ‘work’ of visualization, something which is not bounded by the two-dimensional condition of the image. The act of viewing brilliantly entices the beholder into the virtuous courtly environment of the painting by framing the process of moral self-cultivation as a rewarding, somatic part of daily life, so that the two, real and virtual, worlds become a virtuous one, a soaring and yet mundane narrative for an exemplary life.

We turn now to visual manipulation in polychrome printing of a much-loved drama in a genre called ‘scholar and beauty’. Based on a racy satire of late Tang-dynasty (618–907) mores entitled the *Yingying zhuan* (*Story of Oriole*), the drama known as *Xixiang ji* (*Romance of Western Wing*) was rewritten with a happy ending in the early Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) in around 1300, a notable highpoint in the history of drama writing in China. In the drama, the well-connected young beauty, Oriole, and the talented but obscure ‘student Zhang’ are finally united in wedlock. Beginning in the sixteenth century, as a vibrant mercantile culture spread across south China’s urbanisations under the fraying late Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the drama was frequently published for expanding reading publics in illustrated woodblock-printed volumes. Perhaps the finest extant (though unique) example was made four years before the fall of the dynasty in 1640 and is now in the collection of the Museum of East Asian Art in Köln.<sup>16</sup> It features a frontispiece portrait of the heroine bearing the signature by the leading Yuan-dynasty professional artist Sheng Mao, and 20 deluxe colour scene illustrations without the drama text, just a few captions, a configuration that illustrates the ambition on the part of the

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Klaus Krüger (2014) on *mediality* in the context of early Renaissance painting in Europe.

<sup>15</sup> The reflective effects in scene 7 of the *Admonitions* scroll, which shows two ladies at their toilettes (or the same one twice), were also precursory to this scene.

<sup>16</sup> Inv. R 62,1. Click the permalink (<http://mok.kulturelles-erbe-koeln.de/documents/obj/05161815>) for object details and illustrations. An introduction in English is Delbanco 1983. Critical studies include Wu 1996a and 1996b.

little-known patron, Min Qiji (1580–before 1661) from Wucheng, Zhejiang Province, to rival the art of painting. The extreme approach to the framing of the dramatic narrative and of the actual figural images in this album suggests that the iteration of the narrative itself was scarcely required or necessary, given the ubiquity of the drama in late Ming urban society, but rather that wry commentary on the drama, via these elaborate and insistent framings and geometric transformations, was its main purport.

The illustrations are nestled within various kinds of artistic frames or formats or else featured on or about the surfaces of deluxe domestic objects. There are various rectangular decorative frames, such as one might see bordering illustrations in fancy woodblock-printed books (the frontispiece; scene 8; scene 11; scene 16). There are scenes depicted within the standard elite formats for painting: in an open handscroll (scene 1) and in a folding fan (scene 15); scenes on more commonplace domestic furnishings such as a multiple-leaf standing screen (scene 17) and a hanging blind (scene 18); as well as two incorporated into the form of a decorative hanging lantern (scenes 5 and 14). A number of scenes are rendered onto the surfaces of antiquities and collectibles, such as a bowl by its stand (scene 2), a circular dial (possibly a decorative ink cake in the form of a diviner's tool; scene 4), an ancient bronze vessel (scene 6), and two linked jade bracelets (scene 12). Garden nature scenes of inscribed leaves, butterflies and birds provide the setting for two leaves of the album (scene 3 and 9). One scene is staged as a performance in a small puppet theatre (scene 19). Two make use of internal screens to divide (scene 10) or enclose (scene 13) a female domestic space or bedchamber. Finally, two leaves are largely plain illustrations and have no clear framing (scene 7 and 20). Taken together, these settings transpose the narrative into not so much a late Ming domestic context as an urban lifestyle, and enable the story to be visualized on the surfaces of the contemporary lived environment.

The scene, 'Reading the letter' (scene 10; **Fig. 5**), shows Oriole's scheming maid Hongniang stealthily trying to read the smutty letter that student Zhang has sent her mistress. There are so many visual plays at work here, such as the foils obscuring our and the characters' direct views. The shrubbery on the screen provides double cover for the spying Hongniang, who, unnoticed by Oriole but not by us, observes her efforts at matchmaking (the name Hongniang in modern Chinese means matchmaker, a clue to the immediacy of the tale in late Ming culture).

Other visual plays include the glimpse of a reflection and a mirroring effect (for us, this might recall the toilette scene from the *Admonitions* [**Fig. 2**]). In the first, Oriole has her back to us but her face is revealed, perhaps voyeuristically, reflected in her mirror. Unusually large, this mirror hints at her vanity, which is extraneous to the drama text. For the second, take the inscribed sheet on the table, which



Fig. 5: Scene 10, Oriole reading a letter. From Min Qiji, *Romance of the Western Wing*, dated 1640. Six-colour woodblock-printed album, each leaf 25.5 x 32.2. © Museum of East Asian Art, Köln.

reads *yuanyang* 鴛鴦 or mandarin duck and drake, symbols of marital fidelity. Observe how these two characters are not featured one above the other (traditionally, writing was inscribed vertically from top to bottom, right to left) but tail-to-tail, as it were, to portend a pair of ducks coupled, a figure of the content of student Zhang's letter to Oriole. Otherwise in this scene, however, these two young people are represented as separated by the screen. She sits alone in her boudoir on one side, while he is depicted as the lone fisherman in a watery landscape on the other, an echo of the genre of palace poems about the lonely woman waiting up fretfully for her lover on one hand, and of the scholar who can turn his hand to ineffable, conceptual landscape painting as a form of self-cultivation on the other.

Scene 11 goes even further in asserting the superficial and unreal qualities of the narrative content (**Fig. 6**). The scene is framed within a decorative border like a mere illustration, and one as transitory and impermanent as reflections on water and moon-shadows, even when these are combined to render the silhouette of a figure obscured from our view by a pitted garden rock-sculpture. Note the shadow (right) and reflection in the water (left) of student Zhang, who we take to be



Fig. 6: Scene 11, Student Zhang climbing a wall. From Min Qiji, *Romance of the Western Wing*, dated 1640. Six-colour woodblock-printed album, each leaf 25.5 x 32.2. © Museum of East Asian Art, Köln.

climbing over the wall behind the rock with the support of a flowering plum tree (ironically, another traditional symbol of his scholarly credentials), to get closer to Yingying who is inaccessible in her quarters to the left. In an age that delighted in the trope of irony, it is not surprising to see the characters variously depicted as puppets (scene 19) or else as puppet-like figures in hanging lanterns. In the puppet theatre in scene 19, some characters not in use hang to one side, looking on powerless (left) as the active characters are being manipulated (centre). Still, this is not without humour: here is the scene where a shady cousin is plotting to marry the beautiful Oriole by claiming that student Zhang, recently ranked top in the capital civil service exam, has spurned her for another. Notice how the cousin's hand is louchely held out as if he were stroking the rock seen behind him on the wall. A joking figure for his misshapen priapic state, this rock points up towards the flowers, representing Oriole, which are featured appropriately in intaglio on the roof above. There is a degree of complicity with the audience here, in the suggestion that self-stimulation is as far as this interloper will advance in his marriage suit with Oriole.

In Min Qiji's deluxe album, this famous drama tale is utterly domesticated in the vapid world of 1640 through its *mis-en-scène* across the fine furnishings, collectibles and accessories with which south China's urban consumers were familiar. As with the *Admonitions* scroll, but now in an early modern context of commercial entertainment and expressive irony, multiple pasts (such as the supposed historical setting of the drama narrative, the antiquities, traditions of taste and so on) intermingle with, are etched on or embedded into contemporary objects and spaces of desire.

The third example of a visual narrative from China considered in this essay is Jia Zhangke's acclaimed feature film, *Still Life*, or in Chinese, *Sanxia haoren* (the good people of the Three Gorges). Belying the English title, there is some action in this stately masterpiece set in post-socialist rural south China on the Yangzi River during the building of the colossal Three Gorges dam (1994–2006). The film alternates between two local narratives in sections about spouses trying to find one another as the flood water rises in stages, seen against the national epic or meta-narrative of an engineering triumph over nature. The building of the dam will recall the piling up of earth to achieve honour and greatness for a dynasty, as in the *Admonitions*, but in this iteration there are some disruptively surreal moments interspersed along the way, for example when, behind a laundry line, a building takes off like a rocket, or, behind a shot of a protagonist, a tightrope walker crosses between two buildings. In a third case, a UFO appears in the sky. In all these cases, the surreal seems to imperil the stability of reality and of the narrative itself, and seemingly serves to question also the meta-narrative whereby such projects bring glory upon a regime.

The film opens to and features protracted close-up shots of a protagonist, Sanming, on the move on water or by road, framed by languid scrolling vistas of the iconic landscape in the background and immersed in the echoing soundscape of a massive valley filling with water. The boilerplate commentaries of tourguides, blasted across the valleys from the loudspeakers of tourist boats, serve as reminders of a historical reverence for the beauties of this locality going back to the poetry of Li Bai (701–762) in the Tang dynasty. There is an unrelenting poignancy to the fact that it is all about to disappear underwater, to burying this compound cultural memory. A notable moment is when the protagonist, the former miner Sanming, compares views of the river cutting through a massive gorge. This has been seen as an example of intermediality, or Jia Zhangke's drawing on China's tradition of landscape painting in his cinematography.<sup>17</sup> But as also an example of a visual recursion, it is arguably even richer than this, reaching back even earlier than China's landscape tradition of the last millennium, to the more foundational stage of the art of painting exemplified by the *Admonitions* scroll.

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<sup>17</sup> Mello 2014.



Fig. 7: Sanming compares a view of the Kuimen gorge near Fengjie with its image on a 10 RMB banknote. From *Still Life* (feature film, 2006). Dir. Jia Zhangke. © Xstream Pictures Ltd.

Sanming stands on a promontory taking in the actual scene, which he then matches against the picture of the same famous scene on the Y10 (approximately €1.50) banknote (**Fig. 7**). The picture frame shows the actual view taken in by Sanming and then the view on the bank note held in Sanming's hand so that here we see through his eyes. For us, in the narrative of this essay, this is a recurrence of a technique of dissolving the virtuality of the screen. There is an ambivalence about nostalgia at this moment, as the narratives intertwine. The historical (beauty of landscape) and social (loss of home and family) narratives are indeed about to be



subsumed under a national one (engineering, progress, political legitimacy), as the water rises to fill the reservoir to power the dam. But the irony is that the celebration of this locale's natural beauty, elaborated from Li Bai up to the end of the Mao era, is already virtual since even now little is seen of these sights on account of the cloaking pall of smog in the atmosphere. We never see the full recursion of the actual view and its simulacrum on the banknote in the same picture frame.

The cinematography employs elaborate framings throughout, as is becoming clear. Another example is at a moment toward the end of the film where Sanming and his estranged wife are briefly reunited. The camera is still, and there is little dialogue, throughout the scene of their meeting, which takes place in the shell of a building prepared for demolition. There are two main frames within picture frame and the action shifts between them (**Fig. 8**). The couple meet, silhouetted against the square wall to the right. Then, seen through the large hole of the broken window to the left, a distant building crumbles to the ground. They watch but from within their frame (as we do from within ours): there is a short story (the crumbling of a distant building) which is enacted or bubbles up and then disappears within their story, which takes place with the framework of the film (with its multiple story-lines), which itself implies further frames outside it that are no more or less real than what we experience here. Not long after the crumbling of the building, the reunion scene is over. In the epic national context of development and progress, the lives of actual people (the film featured many first-time actors, including Sanming, rather than professionals) exhibit suffering from anxiety, separation and alienation.



Fig. 8: During Sanming's reunion a distant building crumbles to the ground. From *Still Life* (feature film, 2006). Dir. Jia Zhangke. © Xstream Pictures Ltd.

Such dark themes are frowned upon if not typically banned by the censor, so it is remarkable that this film was not banned. Perhaps, like the *Admonitions* scroll, its release was a representation of that self-regulatory impulse of power in China, a modern iteration of the untold social story from the construction of the mountain and the model of the family in the *Admonitions*. And/or one might point to the sheer richness and compelling visual interest of the production. Jia Zhangke was in a position to draw upon a notably long and palpable sense of history, with visual embodiments in narrative art, a historicity positively maintained by regimes but also with an unbroken popular consciousness into China's antiquity, which provided a wellspring. As these cases have shown, developing over the last two millennia, but especially since the early medieval period, this tradition has been effective at highlighting the nature of selfhood and of human relationships within the sometimes convulsive sequence of China's historical polities.

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