



”The moon in the illustrations of the Renjing yangqiu (Ming Dynasty)”

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The moon in the illustrations of the 人鏡陽秋 *Renjing yangqiu* (Ming Dynasty)

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Introduction

The 人鏡陽秋 *Renjing yangqiu* (Annals serving as a Mirror to Men) consists of 358 brief anecdotes with an edifying and moralizing purpose taken from the Classics and great historical works¹. Nathalie Monnet, curator of the exhibition and of the catalog *Chine, l'empire du trait. Calligraphies et dessins du Ve au XIXe siècle* at French National Library, Paris, 2004, selected two images of this work of which one of interest for us more particularly here (p. 138 of the catalog): one sees there three peaks a little drowned in the river behind a sovereign who greets a woman with the sovereign appearance. We also see a banner-fan that is, we will note, gendered. It is clear here that the sovereign has little power and the person of influence is here his mother.

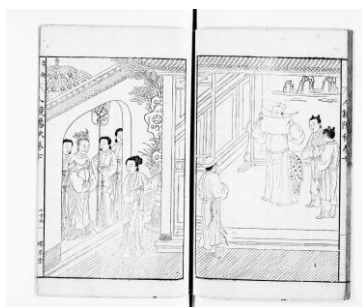


Fig. 1 : 人鏡陽秋 *Renjing yangqiu* (vol. 7, f. 25v-26r, BnF)

Each anecdote is preceded by a double-page illustration, sketch-like but carefully crafted, with an iconography governed by codes. The text of the anecdote itself follows in two parts, the second one giving the moral of the story in a way.

In particular, there are variations on three peaks surrounded by water as a gauge of the ruler's power. The remarkable characters listed in this book are not all sovereigns but nevertheless they are situated in prosperous or troubled periods and are, in fact, rarely women. Nathalie Monnet, about this work, indicates that another work is reserved for the female readership (*Lienü zhuan* in 26 chapters and 209 illustrations in double page) of the same period (a little later).

¹ This 22-chapter work was written by 汪廷訥 Wang Tingna (born c. 1550, himself present in the work through his brief comments after each anecdote under the name 無無居士 Wuwu jushi), illustrated by 汪耕 Wang Geng, engraved by 黃應組 Huang Yingzu, published in 1600 in Beijing and passed on to the French National Library after being purchased in 1720 by the Royal Library from the Foreign Missions Seminary in Beijing.



Fig. 2 : 人鏡陽秋 *Renjing yangqiu* (vol. 12, f-r. 41, BnF)

Figure 2 shows the three peaks with their water bases on a banner-fan that represents the sovereign: it is carried by four emissaries on diplomatic missions abroad, and it signifies an invitation or summons to court, e.g., vol. 1, f-r. 22; vol. 12, f-r. 41; clichés BnF.

(Gallica : <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9006985c/f135.item>>).

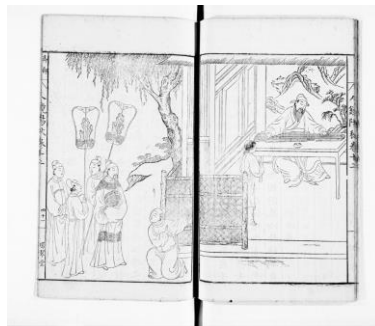


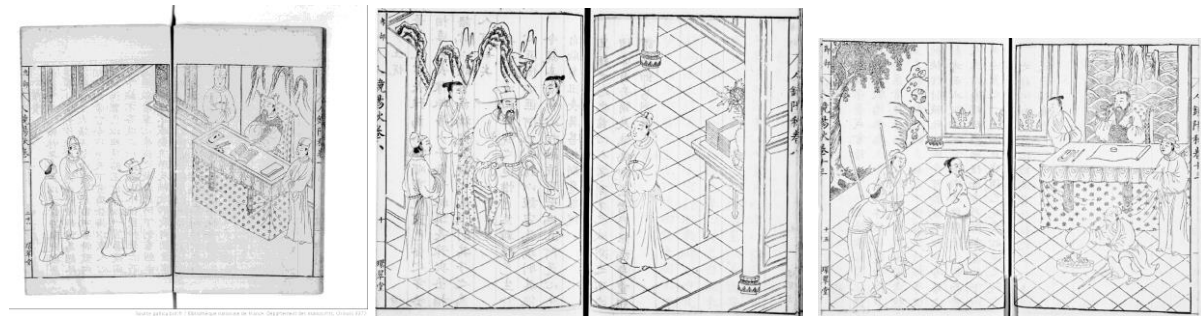
Fig. 3 : 人鏡陽秋 *Renjing yangqiu* (vol. 12, f-r. 41, BnF)

As an example, on Figure 3, we see a renowned scholar, 宗炳, 字少文 Zongbing (nickname: Shaowen), 375-443, a calligraphic painter but also a good citharist, a follower of Buddhism (turned to 庐山 Lushan) and whom the ruler wanted to recruit as an official.

This image combining peaks and waters is generally present on the screen or wall hanging behind the ruler with, on the one hand, variations in the size of the three peaks and their level of emergence relative to the waves and, on the other hand, variations in the amplitude of the waves and the presence or absence of mists on the water or of a few clouds around the peaks. It seems that the choices of these nuances could be dictated by the state of the power at the moment considered, strong or weak, rigid or flexible, in a particular position of the cycle "tradition-modernity", characterizing a reign relative to the static-permanence and dynamic-renewal symbolic dichotomy. This is our first hypothesis.

As for the second hypothesis, induced by this observation of codes of representation based on permanent symbols in Chinese culture, it relates to the moon, associated more or less with clouds, and results from the symbolic potential of this star: distance-approach/night-clarity which is at the heart of the contexts of separation with nostalgia (exile, separated lovers...) It is less obvious than the first one because there are fewer occurrences.

When the ruler is authoritarian, the peaks are high and the waters low (vol. 1, f. 25v-26r, BnF)
 ... whereas a ruler with less secure power sees the waters rise, sometimes accompanied by clouds that would signal a female influence (vol. 13, f. 50v-51r, BnF)...



Thus, two kind of figures represent inverse power levels: in the first case, the "water" part is reduced and the peaks emerge powerfully; whereas in the second case, the water takes on significant proportions relative to the peaks that could be submerged if the water continues to rise.

... and also, when the ruler appears young, the peaks are small and more sunken in the waters
 ... when the ruler is in female dependence, the clouds and sometimes the moon are present, etc.



人鏡陽秋 *Renjing yangqiu* (vol. 1, f. 10v-11r, BnF) et (vol. 8, f. 22, BnF)
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9006985c/f122.item> et ...

The following figure represents a young ruler on his throne, surrounded by adult advisors, in front of a screen where the three peaks are still young (frail and sunken in the waters with dense flows), symbol of fragility and strong movements; and the other shows a feminine presence with peaks rather submerged: this is an element that suggests that the ruler's power may be dependent on a woman; another yin element present is the moon, which signals a female presence whether explicit or not and is there in the position of the setting sun, confirming that the yang is not as dominant as in other circumstances.

Background of the symbol

The "mountain-water" theme, emblematic of landscape painting in China - which is thus titled "山水畫 *shanshui hua*", is symbolically prevalent in early Chinese literary writing, as evidenced by the following few poems from the 詩經 *Shijing* Book of Odes (dated from the eleventh to the seventh centuries BCE):

小雅 Xiao Ya

166. 天保 TIAN BAO (鹿鳴之什 Luming decade [ten days])

天保定爾、以莫不興。(tian bǎo dìng ěr, yǐ mò bú xīng)

如山如阜、如岡如陵。(rú shān rú fù, rú gāng rú líng)

如川之方至、以莫不增。(rú chuān zhī fāng zhì, yǐ mò bú zēng)

Heaven protects and regulates harmoniously for the happiness of all;

Like mountains and hills, like ridges and mounds;

Like rivers flowing on all sides, for the growth of all;

大雅 Da Ya

258. 雲漢 YUN HAN (文王之什 King Wen decade)

父母先祖、胡寧忍予。(fù mǔ xiān zǔ, hú níng rěn yǔ)

旱既大甚、滌滌山川。(hàn jì dà shēn, dí dí shān chuān)

Fathers and mothers, deceased ancestors, peacemakers of the barbarians,

How to endure the extreme drought, the arid mountains and dry rivers?

259. 崧高 SONG GAO (文王之什 King Wen decade)

崧高維嶽、駿極于天。(song gāo wéi yuè, jùn jí yú tiān)

維嶽降神、生甫及申。(wéi yuè jiàng shén, shēng fú jí shēn)

Sacred peak in three high mountains, whose peak rises to the sky;

Triple sacred peak from which the Spirit descended giving birth to Fu and Shen

The three peaks evoke the three Augustans with which the traditional history of Chinese civilization begins, of which the Yellow River is the cradle, mythical times, reputedly happy and virtuous. Marcel Granet says (*La civilisation chinoise*, Paris, Albin Michel, « Bibliothèque de l'Évolution de l'Humanité », 1994 (3^e éd., 1^{re} La Renaissance du Livre, 1929), p. 19-20) :

« An iconographic tradition that goes back at least to the second Han makes the Five Sovereigns preceded by the Three Augustans [Fuxi, Nügua, Shennong]. [...] The Augustans, like the first three rulers, are named in the oldest works of the orthodox and non-orthodox traditions. By preceding the history of the royal dynasties with that of the rulers and the Augustans, Chinese scholars intended to paint a picture of a happy age in which perfect virtue reigned in human form. [...] The theme of the raised waters is linked to a myth of world planning... ».

The first illustration of the 人鏡陽秋 Renjing yangqiu is actually as follows:

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9006985c/f114.image> (intégrer illustration)

It concerns Yu the great in front of the floods...

There is also Qu Yuan (vol. 3, f-r. 10)

<<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9006985c/f125.item>> (intégrer illustration)

As for the second hypothesis, relating to the moon associated more or less with clouds, it results from the potential of this star: distance-approach/night-clarity which is at the heart of contexts of separation with nostalgia (exile, separated lovers...) as shown, for example, in the sung poem by 蘇軾 Su Shi [Su Dongpo] (1037-1101) on the tune 水調歌頭 *Shuǐ diào gē tóu* (Song on the theme of water):

Beginning of the poem



明月幾時有？
Since when does the moon shine?
把酒問青天
Wine in hand, I question the dark sky;

End of the poem



Together with, at a thousand lis, this beautiful moon.

here 嬋 *chan* means (here) "moon" and 娟 *juan* means "beautiful woman's eyebrows, arched; lovely, charming; beautiful woman, beauty" (Ricci). The moon mirror of the beloved woman.

This may also shed light on the pillow talk, i.e. the woman with her power, which corresponds to the hypothesis made for the figurations in this work.

Study of the three illustrations with visible presence of the moon... or even stars

1 - Let's go back to the illustration mentioned above.

吕希哲 Lǚ Xizhe (1039-1116), nickname Yuanming, born in Shouzhou (now Shouxian, Anhui), was an educator and official of the Northern Song Dynasty. Like Confucius, he was one of the scholars raised without a father, by his mother alone, which explains the composition of the illustration.

2 - Let us add a particularly feminine illustration with clouds, birds and three moons?

吕良子, from Quanzhou, Jiading period (1208-1224) of the Song (宋), is a symbol of filial piety. She wished to give her life for her sick father to get well ("愿以自己身命替代老父，请上天见怜，保佑父病速愈，加寿增限。"), and shared this thought with her sister Xiliang. So, in the middle of the

night, the two sisters burned incense and prayed to the sky saying: "I am ready to replace my old father with my own body and life, please have mercy on the sky and bless my old father's illness so that he will recover quickly and prolong his life". Suddenly a group of magpies appeared in the sky calling, flying like clouds in the sky, and a dazzling star making the night sky shine like day. The next morning, my father's illness had improved to the amazement of Prefect Zhen Dexiu. People at that time rushed to tell the story.

Why three circles in the sky? Probably because it is not the traditional context of evocation presented below. The prayers are addressed to the gods of the sky, that shines like a sun (Sun, moon and ?? Venus).

3 - I end with the moon, a real crescent, in the traditional poetic context² of the libation to the moon, the woman being absent, challenged via the moon.

李约 Li Yue, nicknamed 在博 Zaibo, born in present-day Gansu (751-810?) and the son of a Tang dynasty duke, first an assistant to Governor Li Qi during the 德宗 Dezong era, he was later a senior military department official and poet. His writings include: « 相思起中夜，夙驾访柴荆。早雾桑柘隐，晓光溪涧明 ». We are here in the dual position of the scholar between the duty of the mandarin and the Taoist aspiration to eremitism.

Conclusion

Thus, each Chinese character and the image it constitutes, but also the pairs of characters (then their arrangement in a poem or a landscape), their concrete aspects in the material world and their suggestions of principles in the world of ideas, constitute a representation of the world and its ordering. The analysis of a symbolism underlying the figurations in this work could be extended from the two hypotheses of interpretation presented here, in particular with a differentiated role between clouds and moon.

Thanks for your attention

² See VAJ, « Résonances nocturnes en peinture, musique et poésie chinoises », *La Nuit à la croisée des arts et des cultures : perceptions, imaginaires, représentations*, Marie Laureillard & Patrick Otto (dir), séminaire Langarts (2019-2021), à paraître. J'y mentionne que Sur <ctext.org>, la poésie des 隋 Sui et des 唐 Tang contient : 1 507 fois le caractère « 夜 nuit » en 1 199 passages ; 5 222 fois le caractère « 月 lune » en 2 923 passages, moins que les caractères « 日 soleil/jour » (7 401 fois en 4 515 passages) et « 山 montagne » (6 446 fois) mais plus que « 水 eau » (4 712 fois).