Metaphors of Political Vision in *The Eunuch Sanbao's Journeys in the Western Seas*

by
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A dissertation accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in East Asian Languages and Literatures

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University of Oregon
Summer 2026

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy in East Asian Languages and Literatures
Title: Metaphors of Political Vision in *The Eunuch Sanbao's Journeys in the Western Seas*

This dissertation examines *The Eunuch Sanbao's Journeys in the Western Seas* (*Sanbao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi*, 1597) as a literary and visual response to the political, commercial, and global transformations of the late Ming period. Although the novel is set during the Yongle emperor's early-fifteenth-century maritime expeditions, it reflects the political anxieties, expanding global trade, commercial publishing culture, and changing systems of value that shaped the world of its late-Ming readers.

Through recurring ocular motifs—including mirrors, eyes, blindness, and illusion—this dissertation argues that *Sanbao* articulates competing regimes of worldmaking. These motifs do not simply represent acts of seeing; they function as mechanisms through which the novel negotiates political authority, cultural hierarchy, economic value, and competing forms of knowledge. By tracing these motifs across the narrative, the dissertation demonstrates how vision becomes a site where traditional political order encounters the commercial and global realities of the late Ming.

Chapter One introduces the historical context and establishes vision as the dissertation's central analytical framework. Chapter Two examines the mirror as a model of historical and political admonition. Chapter Three explores metallic-colored pupils as symbols of competing political and economic values. Chapter Four examines illusion and misrecognition as forms of political vision that question imperial legitimacy. Chapter Five turns to *Sanbao*'s

hybrid literary form, combining literati traditions with commercial publishing strategies. Chapter Six examines illustrations as visual commodities that shape the novel's circulation and interpretation. Finally, Chapter Seven uses the Gold Child and Silver Child's desire to "see China" to bring together the dissertation's central tension between political vision and global circulation.

Taken together, these chapters reveal a world in which political authority, cultural identity, and economic value can no longer be understood through a single system of interpretation. Situated at the intersection of elite and commercial literary traditions, historical imagination and contemporary concerns, *Sanbao* provides a productive site for examining how late-Ming fiction responded to a changing world. Ultimately, this dissertation demonstrates how vision functions as both a political metaphor and a mode of valuation through which competing understandings of China and the wider world are imagined, negotiated, and contested.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the guidance, encouragement, and support of many people. First, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Professor Maram Epstein, whose expertise in gender studies and the Ming–Qing fiction has been invaluable to this dissertation. She patiently guided me through the uncertainties of transitioning from history to literary studies and devoted countless hours to correcting my grammar and writing technique to help me become a better literary scholar. Beyond her scholarly guidance, she has always been a thoughtful and caring teacher. I feel so honored to be her final doctoral student. And I know I will always remember how lovely the times that we spent together in her beautiful garden, celebrating, enjoying barbecues and gatherings with friends and colleagues from our department.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the other members of my dissertation committee, Professors Roy Chan, Ina Asim, and Scott Gregory. During my six years at the University of Oregon, Professor Chan's expertise in modern Chinese literature and critical theory broadened my perspective and helped shape the direction of my dissertation. I am very lucky to have the opportunity to join his writing group and also teach with him, learning not only from his knowledge but also from his integrity, kindness, and empathy as a teacher and a genuine good person. He reminded me that, while no one is perfect, we can always recognize and learn from the best qualities in others. I am also equally grateful to Professor Ina Asim, whose broad knowledge of Chinese history has enriched my research. After my proposal defense, she shared valuable historical sources on the introduction of eyeglasses into China, which opened new directions for my dissertation. She also supported me during the uncertainty of the job search by sharing possible opportunities and encouraging me to explore different paths. From her, I learned to approach challenges with flexibility and optimism, to remain open to new possibilities, and not to let fear prevent

me from trying. My sincere thanks to Professor Scott Gregory, whose expertise in Ming–Qing fiction, especially his work on *The Eunuch Sanbao's Journey to the Western Seas*, brought an invaluable depth of understanding to my project. His careful, patient, and sincere feedback helped me think more deeply about the text, my dissertation, and even how this research might shape my future teaching. His warmth and humor also brought laughter and joy to rigorous academic conversations.

My deepest gratitude goes to my parents, who have always supported me emotionally and financially. Even when I was stubborn and immature, their love never changed. Only now do I realize how lucky I am to have parents who love me unconditionally. I am also deeply grateful to my sister, my brother-in-law, and their two little ones, Little Spin and Little Fist. The trips, delicious meals, and time we shared whenever I returned to Taiwan always brought me joy. Although I spent six years away from home, I never felt alone. My family was always present for every important moment in my life.

To my friends in the Chinese and Japanese studies cohort, thank you for making my years at UO more meaningful. I am especially grateful to Shan Ren, who has been my closest and most loyal friend throughout these six years. She supported me both academically and emotionally. Although she graduated a year before me and moved to the East Coast to teach, she still made time to attend my dissertation defense. I feel incredibly lucky to have found a lifelong friend at UO. I am also deeply grateful to Kaoru Tamura, who gave me a place to stay while I completed my revisions after the defense. Her kindness and sincere, good wishes meant so much to me during this final stage. I also thank Xinzhu Li and my many friends in the United States and Taiwan. There are too many to name individually, but I sincerely appreciate all the help, encouragement, and good wishes they have given me.

I am grateful to the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures for six years of financial support, which allowed me to focus on my research without financial worry. I

also thank Taiwan's National Science and Technology Council for the one-year TOP Grant, the China Times Cultural Foundation for its scholarship, and the other organizations that helped make this dissertation possible. This dissertation is not mine alone; it carries the kindness, encouragement, and generosity of everyone who accompanied me along the way. To all of you, named or unnamed, I offer my deepest and most heartfelt thanks.

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Statement on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence

At the early stage of writing this dissertation, AI has not widely developed, used and caused such a strong concern as nowadays, it is certain that all the concepts of creating this project, including the conceptual ideas, argument and research questions, as well as the selection of the primary source, and textual analysis are conducted solely by the author. During the latter process of this dissertation, generative artificial intelligence tools (primarily ChatGPT) were used in this dissertation only as a language-support tool only to improve the language clarity and revise grammatical errors. It may also occasionally provide preliminary English translation of selected Classical Chinese passages.

However, in consideration of today's growing concern toward AI usage, any AI-generated translations were carefully reviewed, revised, and verified sentence by sentence against the original Chinese primary texts. I, the author will take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and academic integrity of all translations, interpretations, and other content presented in this dissertation.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: PERCEPTION, VISION, WORLD ORDER, AND NARRATIVE REPRESENTATION

"Ten *aidai* (shaped like eyeglasses; capable of enhancing visual clarity when reading books; each valued at one hundred pieces of gold)." 「靉靆十枚（狀如眼鏡，觀書可以助明，價值百金）。」

– chapter 50· "Kingdom of Malacca" in *Sanbao*.[1]

As the Age of Discovery unfolded, large quantities of silver from the Americas and Japan entered China through expanding global trade networks, contributing to profound economic and social transformations during the late Ming.[2] By the late-sixteenth century, the deepening monetization of silver had reshaped both economic structures and systems of value. Silver became the primary medium of taxation and commercial exchange, accelerating market circulation, stimulating commercial growth, and facilitating the rise of merchant groups whose economic influence increasingly challenged the cultural prestige traditionally associated with the literati.[3]

The sixteenth century also witnessed the rapid expansion of commercial publishing.[4] Although manuscript circulation remained widespread, texts once confined to elite literary networks became increasingly available through print, reaching broader and more

[1] Luo Maodeng 羅懋登, *Sanbao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi* 三寶太監西洋記通俗演義 [*The Eunuch Sanbao's Journeys in the Western Seas*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985), 50: 650.
[2] Harriet Zurndorfer, "Encounter and Coexistence: Portugal and Ming China 1511–1610: Rethinking the Dynamics of a Century of Global–Local Relations," In *Global History and New Polycentric Approaches: Europe, Asia and the Americas in a World Network System* (Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2018), 43, 46-47. https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/29637/GlobalHistoryAndNewPolycentric.pdf?sequence=1
[3] Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (University of California Press, 1998), 238-253.
[4] The category of "printed commercial and popular books" encompassed a wide range of publications, including practical manuals, daily-use encyclopedias, religious tracts, digests and abridged editions of classical and historical works, as well as collections of successful examination essays intended for aspiring degree candidates.

geographically dispersed audiences.[5] Publishers responded to market demand by adapting the content, organization, and visual presentation of books to enhance accessibility, legibility, and commercial appeal.[6] Shaped by the convergence of literati political ideals, commercial culture, and intensified global exchange, late-Ming fiction emerged as a crucial medium through which writers and readers negotiated social change, historical understanding, and competing systems of value.

Scholars have noticed that sensory experience in traditional China was understood not merely as a physical reaction, but as something deeply embedded within emotional life, moral cultivation, and culturally constructed systems of meaning. Sensory functions were frequently interpreted through symbolic, epistemological, and aesthetic frameworks, rather than treated as purely biological processes.[7] In particular, Chinese traditions often understood emotions through bodily and sensory manifestations, a tendency reflected both in the medical discourse and in the metaphorical structures of the written language.[8] Building on this broader framework, scholars such as Jane Geaney have traced how sensory perception in early Chinese thought was closely tied to epistemology and moral cognition. Geaney notes that faculties such as hearing and seeing were associated with *zhi* 知 (knowing), while conceptions of *shen* 聖 (sage/sagehood) in early China (ca. 500 BCE–100 CE) often privileged hearing over sight in relation to the capacity for prescience.[9] Andrew Schonebaum further points out more directly that observation involves not only paying close attention and

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[5] Suyoung Son, *Writing for Print: Publishing and the Making of Textual Authority in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018), 3; for related scholarship on commercial publishing and the expansion of readership in late-imperial China, see the works cited in note. 9.

[6] Lucille Chia, *Printing for Profit: The Commercial Publishers of Jiangyang, Fujian (11th–17th Centuries)* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), 10-12. Chia's discussion appears in the context of a comparison of Chinese and European print cultures but provides useful observations on changing publishing practices in late-imperial China.

[7] Paolo Santangelo, "The Culture of Smells: Taboo and Sublimation from Huchou to Tianxiang," in *Sensing China: Modern Transformations of Sensory Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), 42-45.

[8] Santangelo, "The Culture of Smells," 42.

[9] Jane Geaney, "Aural and Visual Hierarchies in Texts from Early China: Beyond Epistemology of the Senses," in *Sensing China: Modern Transformations of Sensory Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), 29-31.

noticing details, but also perceiving and becoming aware of something in the early-modern texts (Ming-Qing periods).[10] Paolo Santangelo examines representations of sensory feeling in late-Ming literature and fiction, arguing that sensory experience exceeded the realm of physical sensation and contributed to the formation of emotional instinct, social identity, ethical judgment, and the subject's position within society.[11]

Within this intellectual and cultural context, perception and vision in late-imperial China were not understood as purely natural or transparent processes. Rather, seeing was mediated through material conditions, habitual practices, and culturally embedded interpretive frameworks that shaped how reality was apprehended and evaluated. The historical appearance of eyeglasses in China offers a revealing example of this mediated conception of vision. Scholars have argued that references to eyeglasses appear as early as the Southern Song, with texts from the Song, Ming, and Qing periods using terms such as *aidai* 靉靆 and *yanjing* 眼鏡. Drawing on the writings of the Southern Song antiquarian Zhao Xihu 趙希鵠 (1170-1242), who described *aidai* as a device used by elderly readers to restore visual clarity when writing became difficult to discern, some scholars suggest that eyeglasses may have entered China around the 1260s via Central Asia.[12] During the Wanli period (1573-1620), the Ming writer Tian Yiheng 田藝蘅 (1524–?) recorded similar visual aids, emphasizing their capacity to sharpen perception even as they remained unfamiliar to observers.[13] Such devices did not merely compensate for impaired eyesight; rather, they

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[10] Andrew Schonebaum, *Observing the Unseen : Curiosity and Common Knowledge in Early Modern China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2026), 7. http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.40896748.

[11] Santangelo, "The Culture of Smells," 57-58.

[12] Chiu Chung-lin [Qiu Zhonglin]邱仲麟, "Cong mingmu dao shangzhan ——Mingdai yijiang yanjing de wuzhi wenhuashi" 從明目到商戰——明代以降眼鏡的物質文化史[From Vision Correction to Trade Wars: A History of Material Culture of Eyeglasses from the Ming Dynasty onwards], *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊[*Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica*] (2019): 454.

[13] Chiu Yun-Ju [Qiu yunru] 邱韻如, "Ming Qing yanjing zhi wenben suyuan yu shikong beijing tancha" 明清眼鏡之文本溯源與時空背景探查 [Tracing the Origin of Eyeglasses in China by Analyzing Texts and Historical - Geographical Background], *Zhonghua kejishi xuehui xu kan* 中華科技史學會學刊 [*Journal of the Chinese Society for the History of Science and Technology*] no. 20 (2015): 56–72.

reveal a fundamental concept of vision: clarity could emerge not simply from sight, but from assisted and conditioned modes of seeing.

By the late Ming, eyeglasses had become part of a wider circulation of visual technologies linking China to the maritime world. According to recent scholarship, eyeglasses were introduced to China through both overland and maritime routes linking the Islamic world, Europe, Southeast Asia, and the eastern coast of China. Even as such lenses retained associations with foreign knowledge and distant origins, domestic workshops began to produce and market eyeglasses of varying quality, translating an imported visual technology into localized material practices and commercial commodities.[14] The accessibility of these objects foregrounds the extent to which vision itself was increasingly shaped by global contact. To see clearly was no longer only a matter of the eyes, but of commercial mediation—of access to techniques, materials, and modes of knowledge that originated beyond familiar cultural boundaries.

This dissertation offers a comprehensive interpretation of *Sanbao taijian xiyang ji* 三寶太監西洋記 (*The Eunuch Sanbao's Journeys in the Western Seas*; hereafter *Sanbao*), a one-hundred-chapter novel generally dated to the twenty-fifth year of the Wanli reign (1597) and attributed to the late-Ming novelist Luo Maodeng 羅懋登 (fl. 1567–1620).[15] Drawing on the extant Wanli edition titled *Xinke quanxiang Sanbao taijian xiyang ji yanyi* 新刻全像三寶太監西洋記演義 (*Newly Published, Fully Illustrated, The Eunuch Sanbao's Journeys in the*

[14] Chiu, "Cong ming mu dao shang zhan," 455-459.

[15] As indicated by Chang Hwo-Ching, the extant editions of *Sanbao* encompass the Wanli version adorned with illustrations, the Qing edition reprinting the Wanli version, alongside several reprinted versions spanning from the late Qing Xianfeng period (1831-1861) to the early 20th century. See Chang Hwo-Ching [Zhang Huoqing] 張火慶, *Sanbao taijian xia xiyang ji yanjiu* 三寶太監下西洋記研究 (Suzhou daxue Ph.D. diss 1992), 7-11. Digital files pertaining to the Qing reprinted Wanli version or the original Wanli version are accessible through the Harvard Library and the National Archives of Japan Digital Archive. Both versions contain the same illustrations and are titled *Xinke quanxiang Sanbao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi*. See Luo, *Xinke quanxiang Sanbao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi,* Harvard College Library Harvard-Yenching Library, accessed March 23, 2024, https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/chinese-rare-books/catalog/49-990081049850203941; Luo, *Xinke quanxiang Sanbao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi,* National Archives of Japan Digital Archive, Accessed March 23, 2024, https://www.digital.archives.go.jp/img/4256373.

Western Seas), this study examines *Sanbao* through recurring ocular motifs—including mirrors, eyes, illusions, and deceptive appearances—and explores how the novel renders questions of political authority, moral judgment, cultural difference, and historical knowledge simultaneously visible and obscured, thereby transforming ocular motifs into symbolic sites of judgment and misjudgment.

Although inspired by the historical voyages commissioned by the Yongle Emperor 永樂帝 (r. 1402-1424), who dispatched the eunuch Zheng He 鄭和 (1371–1433) to the "Western Seas," traversing regions across Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, *Sanbao* ventures far beyond historical chronicle into highly imaginative narrative terrain. The novel features magical contests between Buddhist and Daoist figures, military conquests of overseas kingdoms, and elaborate depictions of foreign customs, landscapes, and commodities.[16] As the contemporary scholar Liu Chiung-Yun notes, *Sanbao* incorporates a wide range of historical knowledge, travel lore, and descriptive detail associated with Zheng He's expeditions, exemplifying the encyclopedic impulse characteristic of late-Ming popular literature.[17]

By embedding empirical information within fantastical narrative frameworks, the novel produces a form of historical imagination that is simultaneously entertaining, knowledge-driven, and politically suggestive. Yet this historical imagination functions not merely as a

[16] In many of the late Ming publications, information about foreign items and people was recorded with illustrations. Not only did this indicate the interest of the Ming population in information about things foreign, but also revealed that such information had become common knowledge in the Ming. Yuming He has pointed out that in addition to literary publications, numerous Ming miscellanies also contained a book called *Luochong Lu* 贏蟲錄, which recorded information about neighboring countries, foreign people and goods, demonstrating people's curiosity about foreign things. See Yuming He, *Home and the World: Editing the "Glorious Ming" in Woodblock-Printed Books of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. Cambridge* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013), 202-204. Chapter four focuses on the publication, *Luochong Lu*.

[17] Liu Chiung-yun [Liu Qiongyun] 劉瓊云, "Shenmo chuantong yushang haiwai zhishi－*Sanbao tai jian xi yang ji* zhong de shijie , xushi yu xiangxiang" 神魔傳統遇上海外知識—《三寶太監西洋記》中的世界、敘事與想像 [When Fantastic Narrative Encounters Empirical Knowledge: Imagining the World in *The Record of Eunuch Sanbao's Voyage to the Western Ocean*], *Taida zhong wen xue bao* 臺大中文學報 [*Bulletin of the Department of Chinese Literature*], no. 62 (2018): 58–68.

reflection of historical events but as a form of political allegory structured through carefully arranged narrative strategies and recurring ocular motifs. At the same time, *Sanbao* repeatedly foregrounds the inaccuracy and unreliability of vision, presenting acts of seeing as both a means of understanding history and the past and a reminder of the limits of perception in the face of a rapidly changing world.

As acts of seeing in the novel carry the dual functions of perception and misunderstanding, this study adopts "ocular motifs" as its analytical framework to examine the interconnected relations among narrative strategy, visual representation, and historical imagination. Throughout the narrative, *Sanbao* repeatedly deploys motifs of mirrors, eyes, visibility, illusion, and blindness, foregrounding the instability of perception and the ambiguity of appearances. These motifs not only generate narrative spectacle, but also structure processes of political judgment and historical imagination.

Through this sustained focus on vision, the dissertation argues that *Sanbao* articulates two competing regimes of worldmaking. On the one hand, *Sanbao* draws on literati traditions that conceptualize vision as a medium of moral introspection and political judgment, expressing anxiety over dynastic decline, moral failure, and the erosion of elite authority in the face of expanding commerce. On the other hand, the dissertation argues that the novel reflects an emerging awareness of China's position within a global silver-based economy, in which commodities, knowledge, and value circulate through increasingly complex transregional networks. The structural tension between these regimes—between Confucian loyalty and material interest, moral clarity and economic mediation—is repeatedly staged through the manipulation of vision itself.

Within this narrative framework, *Sanbao* exemplifies how late-Ming fiction functioned as a site for negotiating political anxiety and the uncertainty of valuing system under conditions of accelerated global exchange and commercial publishing. As overseas spaces,

foreign kingdoms, and the global circulation of materials increasingly became imaginable yet uncontrollable, fiction could no longer rely solely on stable religious, political, or ethnic norms to organize the world. Consequently, political order is no longer presented as a fixed or stable condition; rather, it must be continually demonstrated, distinguished, and revised in order to be temporarily established. By reading ocular motifs as a method of analysis rather than as decorative imagery, this study demonstrates how late-Ming vernacular fiction reconfigured vision into a problem of governance, ethics, and historical understanding in an increasingly uncertain world.

1.1 The Text and Methodological Case Study: Why *Sanbao* and Should We Read it?

This section explains why *Sanbao* serves as the sole textual focus of this dissertation and suggests why the novel deserves greater scholarly attention. Situating *Sanbao* within its broader literary and socio-historical contexts, this dissertation argues that the text's distinctive narrative structure, thematic complexity, and engagement with the political, cultural, and economic transformations of the late Ming make it particularly suitable for in-depth analysis. To establish this framework, the section first outlines the socio-historical conditions of the late Ming before introducing *Sanbao*'s narrative content, structural organization, and principal characters, all of which contribute to a hybrid textual form that invites an interdisciplinary and mixed-method approach. Finally, the section identifies four interrelated reasons for adopting a single-text framework centered on *Sanbao*.

The late-sixteenth century marked a period of critical transformation in China, during which the expansion of global trade—particularly the influx of silver—generated profound economic, cultural, and social changes in late-Ming society, thereby reshaping both the production and the meanings of late-Ming fiction.[18] These transformations also provided

[18] Andrew H. Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel = Ssu Ta Ch'i-Shu* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton

new contexts through which longstanding concerns regarding political authority, dynastic order, and imperial legitimacy were rearticulated in literary and cultural production.[19] The widespread circulation of silver further stimulated urban growth and commercial expansion, fostering the rise of commercial publishing centers such as Nanjing and contributing to the increasingly market-oriented production and circulation of vernacular fiction.[20]

Given this context of rapid cultural change, two competing methodologies have emerged that offer differing insights into various approaches to analyzing late-Ming fictions. Scholars may approach this period from a perspective aligned with traditional Chinese literati values, employing a methodology rooted in the late-imperial perspective. This approach draws upon the Sinocentrism of Confucian literati and orthodox scholars' views in emphasizing ritual as the basis of social order and the search for sage rule. Implicit in this model of the literati novel is the assumption that the author exercises aesthetic control over the text to produce a coherent moral vision. For instance, formalist Andrew Plaks, who is interested in the formal structure of the text such that it encodes certain meanings, intentions, developed what I call a late-imperial approach to interpret *xiaoshuo* novels in line with literati aesthetic conventions. In his study of literati novels, Plaks argues that late Ming literati novels are carefully structured, with a 100-chapter structure, composed of ten-chapter narrative rhythms, a constructed symmetry between the first and second halves, figural density, and intertextuality.[21]

In contrast, an "early-modern methodology," as exemplified by scholars like Yuming He, involves the application of specific approaches, techniques, and methodologies to analyze

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University Press, 1987), 14-17.

[19] Ibid., 43-44. Plaks notes that during the sixteenth-century literati novels engaged many of the same philosophical, historical, and political concerns as *chuanqi* drama, reflecting the intellectual seriousness of late-Ming literary culture.

[20] For discussions of Nanjing as one of the major centers of commercial publishing in the late Ming, see Lucille Chia, "Of Three Mountains Street: The Commercial Publishers of Ming Nanjing," in *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, vol. 27 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 107-151.

[21] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks*, 96, 216, 497-498.

historical developments, circulation, and contacts spanning generally from the late fifteenth century to the late eighteenth century within a global context. This methodology focuses on understanding China's role as an integral part of the evolving global networks and explores its contributions to the circulation of information, texts, people, and objects. Yuming He, with a particular emphasis on social and materialist perspectives, has identified what she terms the "hucksterism" prevalent in the late Ming print world. Her early-modern approach to commercial late-Ming print culture centers on production techniques and the circulation of information, rather than on the intrinsically encoded messages found within the structure of the text. The primary interest for scholars using this early modern methodology lies in the social meanings generated when considering the text within the context of its production, consumption, and exchange.[22] This approach demonstrates how scholars interpret these texts as reflections of the late-Ming society within an active and interconnected global system.

Within this context, I argue that *Sanbao* integrates the structural conventions of the literati novel, as defined by Plaks, along with vernacular narrative techniques and commercially oriented publishing strategies, thereby producing a hybrid literary form.[23] While this hybridity reflects literati anxieties over social and political crises, its vernacular language and market-oriented publication strategies also respond to the reading expectations and aesthetic preferences of a broader readership. Combined with its visual narrative strategies and recurring ocular motifs, this hybridity makes *Sanbao* a particularly illuminating case for examining the intersection of literati concerns, commercial print culture, and shifting modes of perception in late-Ming China.

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[22] He, *Home and the World*, 119, 189.

[23] The term "literati novel" follows Andrew H. Plaks's definition of late-Ming fiction as a carefully structured literary form characterized by hundred-chapter organization, patterned narrative rhythms, structural symmetry, figural density, and intertextuality. By "vernacular narrative techniques," I refer to the use of plain and direct language, repetitive narrative patterns, and a relatively low linguistic register.

Although the novel is ostensibly named after the Eunuch Sanbao (Zheng He), the narrative's focal point centers on the non-Han Buddhist monk, Jin Bifeng 金碧峰, portrayed as the incarnation of Dipankara, a Buddha who lived many years before Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha. The core ensemble of the Ming navy comprises four principal characters: two historical figures, Commander Zheng He (the Eunuch Sanbao 三寶太監), and Vice Commander Minister Wang 王尚書 (Wang Jinghong 王景弘), both assuming nominal leadership positions within the Ming army. The remaining two characters are fictional: the Buddhist monk Jin Bifeng, and the Daoist priest, the Celestial Master Zhang of Mount Longhu 龍虎山張天師, known for his perpetual challenges to Jin without ever achieving success. Although the characters may initially appear stereotypical and lacking nuance in their personalities, the novel introduces a striking irony through Jin Bifeng, whose benevolent Buddhist image contrasts sharply with his passive acceptance of the violence carried out by the Ming army.

Structurally, *Sanbao* is divided into two broad segments. The first half, culminating in the submission of the Kingdom of Women in chapter fifty, centers on spectacular scenes of magical combat and religious rivalry between Buddhist and Daoist forces. During the first half, the Ming expedition repeatedly relies on the Daoist supernatural power of Celestial Master Zhang, while the Buddhist monk Jin Bifeng functions as the expedition's spiritual authority and moral guide. The latter half shifts toward strategies of deception and illusion, most notably through the actions of the Ming soldier Wang Ming 王明, who employs "Invisibility Grass" to compel foreign kingdoms into submission.[24] This progression—from overt spectacle to subtle manipulation—foregrounds vision as an increasingly unstable narrative problem, bound up with misrecognition, illusion, and the management of

[24] In the novel, it is depicted as a magical grass that makes people invisible to others when they hold it.

appearances. The novel's formal structure provides an internal framework through which different regimes of perception can be observed, tested, and recalibrated over the course of the narrative.

This dissertation adopts a single-text approach and selects *Sanbao* as its core object of analysis for four interrelated reasons. First, *Sanbao* condenses within a single work multiple late-Ming historical concerns, including political ethics, global trade experience, the silver-based economy, commercial publishing, and the writing of visual themes. This convergence renders the novel a compressed site through which broader transformations in social structure and value systems can be examined. Second, although the narrative takes Yongle-era maritime expeditions as its historical point of departure, the novel was produced in the late-Ming and primarily reflects the late-Ming political order and social reality. It thus exhibits a dual character as both historical fiction and what modern scholars have termed "present-dynasty fiction," in which historical imagination is situated within the same dynastic period and functions as a vehicle for contemporary political reflection.[25] Third, *Sanbao*'s structural setting, narrative form, and publication conditions are marked by structural disjunctions that resist stable generic classification. Neither fully assimilable to elite literati fiction nor reducible to popular entertainment, the novel sustains ongoing tension between its narrative strategy, visual representation, and historical meaning. This instability makes it particularly well suited for tracing how perception is repeatedly reorganized within a single textual system. Fourth, the ocular motifs central to this study—mirrors, eyes, visibility and invisibility, illusion, blindness, and deceptive spectacle—recur throughout *Sanbao* in shifting configurations and with varying political implications. Such gradual yet continuous

[25] Scott Gregory, "Daydreaming Dynasty: *The Eunuch Sanbao's Journeys in the Western Seas* and 'Present-Dynasty' Fiction of the Ming," *Ming Studies*, no.70 (2014): 11. doi:10.1179/0147037X14Z.00000000027.

transformations are best captured through sustained analysis of a single text rather than through comparative sampling.

In this sense, this dissertation is not concerned with whether *Sanbao* faithfully represents historical reality, but with how the novel, under conditions of intensified global trade and commercial publishing in the late-sixteenth century, produces a historically-situated mode of seeing. Through the interaction of narrative form and visual writing, *Sanbao* transforms "seeing" itself into a problem of political and moral judgment. By situating these visual operations within the relative safety of fictional narrative, the novel enables late-Ming literati readers to reflect on political legitimacy, imperial authority, and the value disruptions generated by silver circulation and transregional exchange. Taken together, these features make *Sanbao* a particularly revealing case for examining how late-Ming fiction reconfigured vision as a means of negotiating political anxiety, uncertainty of value system, and historical understanding in an increasingly unstable world.

1.2 Historical Background: Competing Perceptions of Worldmaking in the Late Ming

The context of the late-Ming China is critical to understanding the social-historical conditions under which *Sanbao* was produced. From the sixteenth century onward, the expansion of global trade and the massive influx of silver gradually drew China into transregional networks of economic exchange and material circulation. The acceleration of commercial activity not only intensified the production and distribution of commodities, crafts, and luxury goods, but also expanded a consumption culture through which forms of material and symbolic capital—once largely monopolized by the literati—became increasingly accessible to broader social groups.[26] The rise of merchant wealth in turn

[26] Wu Renshu 巫仁恕, *Pinwei shehua : Wan Ming de xiaofei shehui yu shidafu* 品味奢華: 晚明的消費社會與士大夫 [*Taste and extravagance: Late Ming consumer society and the gentry*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2008), 4-6.

blurred conventional boundaries between scholar and merchant, destabilizing established hierarchies of value and challenging the cultural authority long-associated with Confucian elite distinction. Under these conditions, perception itself became a field of pressure: inherited moral frameworks continued to circulate, yet their claim to universality was increasingly strained by the realities of a commercialized and globally entangled world.

This dissertation approaches the late-Ming period as a historically-situated practice—formed through concrete political institutions, economic transformations, and the expansion of print culture. By the late Ming, ways of seeing, knowing, and situating the world were increasingly shaped by the interaction between state governance, commercial expansion and the rapid circulation of information. This period also witnessed an intensified engagement with visual culture and the social functions of vision.[27] In particular, vision became bound to questions of authority, judgment, and legitimacy, as political order, social hierarchy, and systems of value were rendered visible and subject to competing and often unstable interpretations in everyday life. These changing ways of seeing were closely tied to the socio-historical contexts of the late Ming.

As the Ming state continued to promote a Sinocentric vision grounded in Confucian ritual hierarchy, tribute relations, and moral governance, intensified maritime exchange and silver-driven commercialization simultaneously connected China more deeply to transregional networks, introducing new commodities, objects, and forms of knowledge that challenged inherited assumptions about value and cultural centrality. Alongside these developments, the rapid growth of commercial markets and urban consumption reshaped

[27] On the intensified role of visual culture and visual mediation in late-Ming society, see J. P. Park, *Art by the Book: Painting Manuals and the Leisure Life in Late Ming China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), especially his discussion of painting manuals and print culture as commercially circulated media through which literati aesthetics, visual judgment, and culturally structured ways of seeing were disseminated across broader social audiences. Although Park's study focuses primarily on visual culture and artistic production, it also illuminates the broader historical conditions under which vision became increasingly entangled with social distinction, cultural legitimacy, and expanding forms of circulation in the late Ming.

everyday experience, generating new audiences and new expectations for novelty, visibility, and information.[28] Print culture, enabled by durable woodblock technology and an expanding book trade, became a crucial site where these competing regimes of perception were translated into widely accessible and visually legible forms.

It was within this historically specific environment—marked by shifting social hierarchies, commercial publishing, and global circulation—that late-Ming literature, particularly popular genres such as the chaptered vernacular novel, increasingly developed an entertainment function alongside its established didactic and moral purposes. Precisely because these texts circulated through competitive commercial markets and diverse reading practices, they became deeply embedded in the social, economic, and cultural transformations of the late Ming. Situating literary production within these overlapping political, global economic, and commercial contexts provides the groundwork for understanding how works such as *Sanbao* repeatedly stage acts of seeing, misrecognition, and visual negotiation. The following sections examine these dynamics through the lenses of state ideology, global circulation, and commercial print culture, respectively.

Ming State Vision: Maritime Policy, Tribute System, and the Hierarchical Worldview

From its inception, the Ming dynasty inherited a Sino-centric vision of the world that positioned China as the normative center of civilization and institutionalized this worldview through policies governing maritime movement, foreign contact, and exchange.[29] Following the founding of the dynasty in 1368, the Hongwu Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (r. 1368-1398) promulgated and rigorously enforced the maritime prohibition (*haijin* 海禁) which

[28] Wu, *Pinwei shehua*, 27-55.
[29] Cheng Wing-Sheung [Zheng Yongchang] 鄭永常, *Laizi haiyang de tiaozhan: Mingdai haimao zhengce bijiao yanjiu* 來自海洋的挑戰: 明代海貿政策比較研究 (Taipei: Daoxiang chubanshe 稻香出版社, 2008), 7-16.

restricted private overseas travel and commerce while reserving legitimate foreign contact for state-sanctioned channels within the tribute system.[30] In doing so, the early Ming sought not simply to restrict mobility but to monopolize the terms under which the foreign could be recognized, classified, and made politically intelligible.

The enforcement of maritime restriction was closely bound to concerns over coastal security and Japanese piracy (*wokou* 倭寇).[31] Restrictions on private maritime mobility were accompanied by intensified coastal defense and surveillance, revealing a dual strategy that combined exclusion with coercive regulation. Sino–Japanese relations were thus marked by persistent tension, including periods in which the Ming court rejected Japanese tribute missions, underscoring the state's determination to discipline the circulation of people, goods, and information across maritime space.[32]

Yet, as recent scholarship has shown, the Hongwu court's approach was not uniformly isolationist. In 1383, in response to diplomatic conflict with Java, the Ming formalized a policy that integrated tribute and trade, institutionalizing a framework in which political recognition and commercial exchange were formally fused.[33] Specifically, under this system, foreign polities were required to obtain court-issued tally documents (*kanhe wence* 勘合文冊) certifying the legitimacy of diplomatic missions and commercial activity; access to trade, travel, and tribute presentation was made contingent upon such authorization.[34] Exchange thus became visible and legitimate only within a ritualized, state-controlled order.

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[30] Gakusho Nakajima, "The Structure and Transformation of the Ming Tribute Trade System," in *Global History and New Polycentric Approaches: Europe, Asia and the Americas in a World Network System* (Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2018), 141-142. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-4053-5_7

[31] Cheng, *Laizi haiyang de tiaozhan*, 16-20.

[32] Cheng Wing-Sheung [Zheng Yongchang] 鄭永常, *Haijin de zhuanzhe: Ming chu Dongya yanhai guoji xingshi yu Zheng He xia xiyang* 海禁的轉折：明初東亞沿海國際形勢與鄭和下西洋 (Taipei: Daoxiang chubanshe 稻香出版社, 2011), 40-46.

[33] Ibid., 40.

[34] Ibid., 43-45.

As scholars have noted, the early-Ming tribute system and maritime exclusion policy were inseparably linked within a broader tribute trade–maritime exclusion system, under which the Ming government monopolized diplomatic exchange and foreign trade with neighboring polities.[35] The tribute system, in this sense, functioned not only as a diplomatic and economic institution but also as a visual political regime—one that rendered hierarchy legible through ceremonial protocol, documentary verification, and the staged visibility of foreign submission. Foreign polities were not conceived as equal partners in exchange but as entities to be ranked and incorporated into a Ming-centered political imagination. Participation required the public performance of deference and the formal acknowledgment of imperial centrality, making political legitimacy and economic access inseparable from ritual recognition.

Against this inherited framework, the Yongle emperor recalibrated maritime governance in response to shifting geopolitical conditions. Rather than dismantling Hongwu's ideological order, Yongle refined institutional mechanisms—such as the Maritime Trade Offices (*shibosi* 市舶司)—that governed tribute and exchange, extending their operational reach across maritime Asia.[36] State-directed missions—most prominently the eunuch-led expeditions later associated with Zheng He, also known as Sanbao ("Three Treasures")—translated imperial authority into motion across maritime space. Ming sources categorized the waters traversed by these fleets as the "Western Ocean" and the "Eastern Ocean," designations that organized

[35] Nakajima, "The Structure and Transformation," 142; Also see Shigeo Sakuma 佐久間重男, *Nichi Min kankeishi no kenkyū* 日明関係史の研究 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1992), 25-39; Cheng, *Laizi haiyang de tiaozhan*, 7-56; Chao Zhongchen 晁中辰, *Mingdai haijin yu haiwai maoyi* 明代海禁與海外貿易 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2005), 30-50; Li Qingxin 李慶新, *Mingdai haiwai maoyi zhidu* 明代海外貿易制度 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2007), 29-54; Henry Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations During the Ming III, Trade Relations: The Horse Fairs (1400–1600)* (Bruxelles: Institut belge des hautes études chinoises, 1975), 72-83.

[36] Whereas the Ming founder, Zhu Yuanzhang, had abolished the Maritime Trade Offices, the maritime trade offices inherited from earlier dynasties, as part of his broader effort to suppress private overseas commerce and monopolize foreign contact, the Yongle emperor reinstated and reorganized these offices in order to bring maritime exchange back under direct state supervision. See Cheng, *Haijin de zhuanzhe*, 25-26.

maritime Asia into legible zones of imperial engagement.[37] The significance of these missions lies less in the biography of any single envoy than in the institutional logic they embodied: maritime mobility became a mechanism of imperial projection, converting Zheng He's voyages and encounter into confirmation of Ming centrality.

The unprecedented scale and militarized organization of the fleets reinforced this logic of visibility and enforceability.[38] From as early as 1405, shipbuilding for ocean-going vessels was brought under centralized supervision, producing fleets anchored by the so-called treasure ships (*baochuan* 寶船) whose scale Ming sources consistently emphasized as exceptional. As scholars such as Geoff Wade have shown, a substantial proportion of expedition members were trained soldiers, underscoring the explicitly militarized character of these maritime missions.[39] Authority, in other words, was made not only normative but materially and visually demonstrable at sea. Yet this projection of power did not translate into sustained openness in maritime governance.

It is important to note, however, that by the time *Sanbao* was published in 1597, the Ming maritime prohibitions had already been substantially relaxed. Although restrictions on overseas trade and travel remained in place, commercial exchange through both official and unofficial channels had expanded considerably. Scholars have indicated the opening of Yuegang Port 月港 in Fujian in 1567 marked a critical turning point by permitting Chinese merchants to engage legally in overseas trade.[40] Hamashita likewise identifies the early Longqing reign (1567–1572) as a crucial stage in the weakening of the tribute-trade order, when merchants from southern Fujian were authorized to conduct trading voyages to

[37] Gungwu Wang, "Ming Foreign Relations: Southeast Asia," in *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 301-302.
[38] Cheng, *Haijin de zhuanzhe,* 59-63.
[39] Geoff Wade, "Engaging the South: Ming China and Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51, no. 4 (2008): 592-594.
[40] Cheng, *Haijin de zhuanzhe,* 129-184.

Southeast Asia.[41] *Sanbao* thus emerged at a moment when foreign goods, peoples, and knowledge were circulating more widely, providing readers with new opportunities to encounter and imagine the overseas world.

This policy shift followed earlier developments, most notably the formal authorization in the thirty-second year of the Jiajing reign (1533), when Portuguese traders were permitted to conduct trade in Macau. Having first arrived on the China coast in the early sixteenth century, the Portuguese had initially engaged in smuggling and were involved in repeated military conflicts with the Ming state. They were not officially granted the right to trade in Macau until 1533. Thereafter, they assumed the role of intermediaries in China's foreign commerce, facilitating the circulation of goods between China, Southeast Asia, and Europe. In contrast, Yuegang operated under a more restrictive regulatory framework. While it allowed Chinese merchant vessels to sail abroad, it prohibited foreign ships from docking and engaging in trade at the port.[42] Even after the relaxation of the maritime prohibitions in the late sixteenth century, as scholars have observed, the tribute-trade sector continued to constitute an important component of foreign commerce. In other words, the expansion of maritime trade did not replace tributary exchange; rather, the two systems continued to operate alongside one another. Commercial activity thus developed within a political environment still shaped by state-centered conceptions of foreign relations and overseas exchange.[43]

Taken together, Ming maritime policy, tributary trade, and imperial expeditions constituted more than a set of diplomatic practices; they produced a regime of hierarchical legibility in which political authority, economic exchange, and visibility were tightly interwoven. This Sinocentric order shaped not only imperial governance but also the conceptual horizons through which elite writers perceived and narrated foreign lands,

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[41] Nakajima, "The Structure and Transformation," 151-152.
[42] Cheng, *Haijin de zhuanzhe*, 218-224.
[43] Nakajima, "The Structure and Transformation," 156.

peoples, and encounters. In this sense, it is through this Sino-foreign institutional system that the literati's perspectives—or "vision"—were shaped, thereby structuring how they conceptualized and apprehended the relationship between the Sinocentric self and foreign others. By the late-Ming, however, this normative framework increasingly encountered pressures generated by expanding trade and global circulation—a tension that the following section examines through the lens of silver, transregional exchange, and shifting modes of gaze.

Global Interruption and Gaze: Silver, Maritime Trade, and China in the Age of Discovery

Conventionally termed Europe's "Age of Discovery," the expansion of transoceanic navigation from the late-fifteenth century onward constituted not merely a series of exploratory voyages, but a structural transformation in the organization of space, exchange, and knowledge on a global scale. The maritime routes expanded the scope of global interaction by linking multiple continents—Europe, the Americas, Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and East Asia—facilitating not only the movement of people and commodities but also the circulation of precious metals, religious agents, and printed materials containing visual illustrations and cartographic knowledge.[44] Oceans were thereby reconfigured from natural boundaries into conduits of exchange, reshaping early-modern spatial imagination.

For late-Ming China, the most consequential effect of this global restructuring was the unprecedented influx of silver. As China became increasingly integrated into transregional trade networks, silver mined in the Americas entered East Asian circuits through maritime exchange, particularly via Southeast Asian entrepôts. Ming maritime activities—both military and commercial—extended across the South China Sea, from Luzon to Thailand and the

[44] William Atwell, "Ming China and the Emerging World Economy, c. 1470–1650," in *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 377-379.

Champa ports, and, at times, reached beyond the Straits of Malacca to encompass regions as far as Arabia and East Africa. These expanding networks facilitated contact with Indian, Persian, and Arab traders, while also opening China's southeastern coast to the growing commercial and political presence of European powers such as the Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch.[45]

This massive inflow accelerated monetization, expanded market exchange, and reshaped patterns of wealth accumulation, destabilizing established social hierarchies and blurring conventional distinctions between scholar-official elites and the rising merchant class. As luxury goods, cultural commodities, and symbolic capital circulated beyond elite circles, late-Ming writers and publishers—many of them degree-holders without office or literati marginalized from official careers—faced growing uncertainty regarding moral authority, social order, and the presumed universality of Confucian orthodoxy.[46]

China's participation in global trade did not occur through a single moment of policy reform or ideological reorientation, but through the gradual accumulation of everyday commercial practices that linked local markets to distant sites of extraction and exchange. By the sixteenth century, silver had become deeply embedded in both fiscal administration and commercial life, linking everyday transactions in late-Ming China to global trade networks. Despite the constraints of the Ming maritime prohibitions, such exchanges continued through both formal and informal channels.

Based on this contextual framework, this historical condition can be seen as a moment of global interruption. Rather than signaling China's sudden "opening" to the world, this interruption took the form of sustained pressure exerted on inherited systems of value, perception, and cosmological order. Long-standing Sinocentric assumptions that positioned

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[45] Wang, "Ming Foreign Relations," 306.
[46] Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Urbana, IL.: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 153-155.

China as the moral and cultural center of the world were not displaced outright, but repeatedly strained as goods, foreign objects, and precious metals circulated through channels that were only partially visible and imperfectly regulated. The resulting disjunction between imperial ideals of moral governance and the lived realities of economic circulation generated persistent tension between normative order and material practice.

Alongside the circulation of silver and commodities, Christian missionaries—most notably members of the Society of Jesus, known as Jesuits—traveled along maritime routes and introduced new forms of scientific knowledge and alternative worldviews. Jesuit missionaries began arriving in southern China during the Wanli reign (1573–1620), with figures such as Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) establishing sustained intellectual and social networks by the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries. Among their contributions was the *Kunyu Wanguo quantu* 坤輿萬國全圖, a world map based on European cartographic principles, which reconfigured late-Ming conceptions of foreign and overseas spaces and offered new frameworks for understanding Sino-foreign relations.[47] Missionaries thus functioned not merely as religious agents, but as vectors of a competing gaze that further complicated late-Ming modes of seeing and knowing the world.

By situating *Sanbao* within this moment of global interruption, this dissertation argues that the novel's sustained engagement with vision, mirrors, and foreign encounters constitutes a literary response to China's entanglement in early-modern global trade. Rather than offering a coherent or authoritative vision of the world, the text repeatedly stages moments in which perception fails and judgment falters, transforming economic tensions and competing systems of value and worldview into problems of vision, knowledge, and ethical evaluation. The detailed mechanisms of silver circulation and maritime trade are examined in Chapter

[47] Willard Peterson, "Learning from Heaven: The Introduction of Christianity and Other Western Ideas into Late Ming China," in *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 795-797.

Three; here, the emphasis lies on clarifying the conceptual terrain in which late-Ming writers and readers confronted a world rendered newly visible—and newly unstable—by global flows of material and meaning.

The effects of this global disruption were mediated through the concrete social and cultural conditions of late-Ming China. Silver-driven commercialization materialized in the proliferation of commodities and commercially printed books circulating in the marketplace, through which global forces became tangible and open to interpretation. It is through these mediating structures—commercial exchange, material consumption, and textual reproduction—that global disruption was refracted into ordinary social practices, a process that the following section examines through the lens of commercial print culture and printed matter with illustration.

Cultural and Market Mediation：Print Culture, Commodities, and the Reorganization of Perception

The expansion of trade in the late Ming accelerated the monetization of China's economy and propelled the rise of an increasingly influential merchant class, gradually eroding conventional distinctions between scholars and merchants.[48] As goods once restricted by status circulated more widely and visibly, late-Ming consumption culture became increasingly oriented toward display, novelty, and symbolic transgression, reshaping everyday practices of seeing and judging value.[49] Historians have observed, this tendency toward extravagance should not be understood simply as moral excess, but as a structural outcome of China's deepening integration into domestic and transregional trade networks.[50] Silver-driven commercialization transformed not only material life, but also the social and perceptual conditions through which value, knowledge, and legitimacy were apprehended.

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[48] Wu, *Pinwei shehua*, 293-294.
[49] Clunas, *Superfluous Things*,141-165; see also Wu, *Pinwei shehua*, 125-142; 205-246.
[50] Wu, *Pinwei shehua*, 40-45.

The pursuit of exotic materials, foreign curiosities, and marvelous objects (*qizhen yiwu* 奇珍異物) blurred the boundary between material desire and imaginative exploration, cultivating habits of looking that privileged rarity, spectacle, and visual distinction.[51]

It was within the convergence of a state-centered worldview, expanding silver-based exchange, and the rapid growth of illustrated commercial print culture that *Sanbao* emerged. Compared to the early Ming, when social and political hierarchies were more rigidly structured, the late Ming witnessed the proliferation of alternative perspectives through which foreignness, distance, and value could be perceived and interpreted.[52] Within this context, *Sanbao* functioned as a hybrid text that mediated between competing regimes of perception and value. While drawing upon literati concerns with political legitimacy and historical seriousness, it also operated as a commercial commodity designed for circulation within the expanding book market. Through the integration of narrative and visual forms accessible to a broad readership, the novel rearticulated imperial memory and global imagination within the circuits of late-Ming print culture.

Within this changing social landscape, many degree-holding or examination-trained literati who faced limited success in official careers turned to cultural and commercial pursuits. Participation in printing, publishing, editing, and compilation drew literati expertise directly into the operations of the commercial book trade, intertwining scholarly authority with market imperatives and consumer demand. Enabled by durable and visually-adaptable woodblock printing, late-Ming print culture developed into a highly competitive enterprise in which books circulated simultaneously as cultural artifacts and market commodities.

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[51] Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure,* 177-179.

[52] Ibid., 186-194; see also Wu, *Pinwei shehua*, 75-102. Wu's study of sedan-chair culture illustrates the broader transformation of late-Ming social values. He demonstrates that while the early Ming maintained strict regulations over sedan-chair usage as a visible marker of status and political hierarchy, the late Ming saw the proliferation of conspicuous and often transgressive forms of consumption that challenged established social distinctions. The changing meanings attached to material objects reveal a society in which commercial wealth increasingly reshaped perceptions of value, status, and social identity beyond the confines of earlier hierarchical norms.

Print culture functioned as a mediating apparatus between two coexisting yet tension-filled frameworks of understanding. On the one hand, it remained embedded in Sino-centric literati traditions that privileged the Confucian moral order, hierarchical cosmology, and classical authority. On the other hand, it responded to China's increasing entanglement in global circuits of trade, exchange, and information. Through low-register accessible vernacular language, illustrations, visual design, and paratextual claims of novelty, books rendered both orthodox values and global novelty legible within a commercialized environment, without fully reconciling their contradictions.

Rather than stabilizing perception, commercial print culture reconfigured it. As books circulated as visual commodities among increasingly diverse readerships, engagement with texts extended beyond reading to include browsing, viewing, handling, and forms of collective consumption. Both the marketplace and the printed page thus became sites where unfamiliar forms of value and foreignness were translated into recognizable cultural forms, often detached from inherited moral frameworks. By approaching literature as a material and visual object situated at the intersection of commerce, media, and social practice, this dissertation situates *Sanbao* within the broader context of print culture and its role in shaping the conditions under which late-Ming readers learned to see, interpret, and misinterpret the world. In so doing, it demonstrates how fiction mediated the promises and risks of a world increasingly defined by circulation, regimes of visibility, and misrecognition.

1.3 Scholarly Review and the Positioning of *Sanbao*

Scholarly interpretations of *Sanbao* have long been shaped by uncertainty regarding the novel's genre and narrative form, rendering it a late-Ming text that resists straightforward classification within established understandings of the period's fiction. At the level of language and narrative texture, the work displays pronounced features associated with popularized storytelling: vernacular prose, repetitive phrasing, accumulative catalogues, and

episodic expansion. Such stylistic traits resemble what Yuming He has described as the "hucksterish" character of late-Ming commercial print culture—publications that privileged rapid circulation, market appeal, and informational density over aesthetic unity or the consistent refinement associated with literati writing.[53]

However, when examined at the level of overall structure, *Sanbao* simultaneously exhibits distinctive features associated with the literati novel tradition. The extant Wanli edition, as mentioned, presents an elaborately illustrated one-hundred-chapter format whose bipartite symmetry, rhythmic organization, and intertextual density closely align with the structural criteria articulated by Andrew Plaks. In his foundational structuralist analyses of late-imperial *xiaoshuo*, Plaks argues that literati fiction encodes meaning through a carefully designed compositional architecture: a hundred-chapter structure organized into ten-chapter narrative rhythms, deliberate symmetry between the first and second halves of the text, figural density, and extensive intertextual engagement.[54] Many of these formal and structural characteristics are clearly present in *Sanbao*, reinforcing its apparent affiliation with elite narrative conventions. It is precisely within this hybridity—where vernacular and literati elements coexist—that *Sanbao* has remained difficult to incorporate into existing frameworks of scholarly discussion.

Earlier scholarship frequently approached the novel by comparing it with *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (*Journey to the West*, 1592), situating it within traditions of Buddhist transcendence and fantastical narrative. Roderich Ptak, for instance, emphasizes structural parallels between the two works, including paired figures and the juxtaposition of the Three Teachings, and interprets *Sanbao* as a form of religious allegory oriented toward Buddhist notions of emptiness. Within this framework, the failed quest for the imperial jade seal is read as a

[53] He, *Home and the World*, 3, 248.
[54] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, 96, 216, 497-498.

demonized temptation—analogously described as "satanic"—that attempts to lure the Yongle Emperor and is therefore destined to fail.[55]

More recent scholarship, however, has redirected attention toward questions of dynastic anxiety and political legitimacy. Scott Gregory categotizes the text as "present-dynasty fiction" and reads the lost imperial jade seal as reflecting unresolved anxieties surrounding Ming legitimacy following the Yuan–Ming transition rather than the religious accomplishments. Drawing upon Andrew Plaks's structural model, Gregory interprets the ironic denouement of emptiness present in both *Journey to the West* and *Sanbao*, positing that the fruitless pursuit of the imperial seal will ultimately give way to the acknowledgment of the "barbarian" states.[56] Sarah Schneewind, in turn, emphasizes the narrative's redirection of legitimacy away from ritualized symbols and toward responsible governance and concern for the people's livelihood.[57] Within this context, the interpretive emphasis on *Sanbao* has gradually shifted from religious to political allegory. Yet even within this late-imperial hermeneutic framework—focused on traditional literati concerns with religious enlightenment and political legitimacy—the novel has largely been examined in terms of symbolic meaning and ideological interpretation, rather than through an analysis of how its narrative structures reorganize representations of power relations and cultural difference.

A significant departure from this late-imperial framing emerges in Chiung-yun Evelyn Liu's early modern approach. Rather than reading *Sanbao* primarily as an allegory of dynastic crisis, Liu situates the novel within the context of early global interactions that accelerated maritime exchange and the circulation of knowledge about foreign lands. She demonstrates how the narrative constructs a multiethnic imperial imagination by reorganizing

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[55] Roderich Ptak, "Hsi-Yang Chi 西洋記- An Interpretation and Some Comparisons with Hsi-Yu Chi," in *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 7, no. 1/2 (1985):119-121, 139-141.
[56] Gregory, "Daydreaming Dynasty," 11, 17-20.
[57] Sarah Schneewind, "Response to Scott Gregory, 'Daydreaming Dynasty,'" *Ming Studies*, no. 74 (2016), 102.

both its principal characters and its structures of authority in response to an increasingly interconnected sixteenth-century world.[58]

Among these figures, Jin Bifeng, portrayed with foreign features and non-Han characteristics, is positioned as the central spiritual authority of the Ming fleet. Eunuch Sanbao, depicted as having Muslim origins, emerges as a key protagonist responsible for navigation and the gathering of information, owing to his linguistic abilities and cross-cultural experience. Liu argues that through this cross-culturally constituted voyage team, "non-Han" identities are reconfigured from marginal positions into essential resources for imperial expansion.[59]

Within this framework, Liu further highlights the narrative significance of the character of Wang Ming, who claims the ability to understand the speech of birds—an ability that symbolizes the capacity to traverse boundaries between ethnic groups and even across species. [60] Later, Wang Ming acquires "Invisibility Grass," which enables him to manipulate what others can and cannot see, thereby playing a decisive role in various encounters and conflicts. Building on Liu's reading, this study argues that Wang Ming's abilities extend beyond linguistic competence to encompass the manipulation of perception and visual experience, through which he shapes others' judgment and modes of understanding. Through his power of invisibility, Wang Ming actively reconfigures the sensory order of the world, demonstrating that conquest in *Sanbao* is not achieved solely through military force or religious authority, but through the strategic reconstruction of perception itself.

This dissertation extends these conversations by arguing that *Sanbao* not only depicts overseas conquest and the tribute system but also constructs ocular motifs within its narrative

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[58] Chiung-Yun Evelyn Liu, "Knowledge, Emotion, and Imagination: Negotiating Cultural Boundaries in *The Eunuch Sanbao's Voyage to the Western Ocean*," *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2020): 117-118. muse.jhu.edu/article/759997.
[59] Ibid.,118-125.
[60] Ibid., 126-130.

as metaphors for the novelist's anxieties about late-Ming society. While the first half of the narrative foregrounds the religious contestation and supernatural demonstrations of legitimacy, the latter half increasingly turns to Wang Ming's manipulation of perception through the Invisibility Grass, marking a transition from supernatural and military conquest to ideological control. Existing scholarship has illuminated the novel's political allegory and its reconfiguration of a multiethnic imperial imagination; however, it has paid less attention to the narrative mechanisms through which such reconstructions are made to operate.

This dissertation suggests that *Sanbao*, through three distinct yet interconnected visual strategies, transforms relations of power and cultural difference into a visible yet unstable narrative space. First, by invoking the historiographical principle of taking history as a mirror (*yi shi wei jing* 以史為鏡) and the model of Sima Guang's 司馬光 (1019-1086) *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (*Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*) —a title bestowed by Emperor Song Shenzong 宋神宗 (r. 1067–1085) to underscore its function as a moral and political guide based on the maxim "By reflecting on past events, one gains assistance in the principles of governance" (*Jian yu wangshi, you zi yu zhidao* 鑑於往事，有資於治道)—this dissertation contends that *Sanbao* reframes Yongle's voyages as a reflective surface through which late-Ming governance may be critically examined.[61] Second, through the construction of the kingdoms of the Golden-Eye (*Jinyan guo* 金眼國) and Silver-Eye (*Yinyan guo* 銀眼國) peoples, bodily markers are transformed into visible signs of political hierarchy, cultural and ethnic differentiation, and the value system structured by a silver-based economy, thereby visualizing the logic of value under conditions of global circulation. Third, through Wang Ming's manipulation of invisibility—alongside episodes featuring esteemed ghosts

[61] Lin Shi-Min 林時民, "'Tong gujin zhi bian' de shixue chuantong"通古今之變"的史學傳統" [The Historical Tradition of ' Having a Thorough Knowledge of the Changes from Ancient Times to the Present], *Taiwan shida lishi xuebao* 臺灣師大歷史學報 [*Bulletin of Historical Research*], no. 34 (2005): 46.

who remain in the underworld and the recurring motif of the phoenix egg in place of the realized appearance of the phoenix—the text stages political legitimacy and righteous rule as simultaneously anticipated, unstable, and deferred. Through mirrors, bodily markers, and the manipulation of perception, *Sanbao* ultimately transforms doubts about imperial authority into a sustained narrative experiment about the judgment and misjudgment of the exercise of power.

While scholars—especially Liu in her early modern reading—have approached *Sanbao* through frameworks of imperial imagination, ethnic configuration, and global political encounter, the analysis remains largely confined to issues of imperial identity and worldmaking at the level of ideological and narrative structure. Yet this period was shaped not only by expanding geopolitical horizons but also by profound transformations in economic practice, monetization, and commercial publishing. As both a late-Ming literary work and a commercial publication, *Sanbao* was shaped by these economic and print-market transformations, though it has rarely been analyzed from this material perspective. To grasp how the novel stages vision as a political problem, we must therefore examine the commercial infrastructures that conditioned how texts were produced, circulated, valued, and consumed.

In recent years, scholarship has increasingly emphasized the transformation of late-Ming fiction in relation to developments in book production, print culture, consumer practices, and the accelerated circulation of knowledge. Lucille Chia has demonstrated that commercial publishing in Jianyang tailored the types, categories, and production of imprints to the demands of the market, prioritizing works that could be produced at low cost and with minimal financial risk. As Chia observes, this mode of production was largely market-driven and fully commercialized.[62] Yuming He further characterizes this mode of production as

[62] Chia, *Printing for Profit*, 250-251.

"hucksterish," emphasizing speed of circulation, marketability, and informational density over aesthetic unity or literati refinement. Texts of this kind—such as daily-use encyclopedias—compiled practical knowledge, sensational accounts, and imaginative depictions of distant lands, thereby facilitating the rapid dissemination of information about foreign regions.[63]

For example, such encyclopedias frequently included sections like the *Record of Naked Creatures* (*Luochong lu* 贏蟲錄). Although the date of its compilation remains debated, some scholars suggest that the text was completed in the early-Ming period.[64] This text offers vivid portrayals of foreign peoples and overseas territories, stimulating fascination with cultural otherness and expanding the imaginative horizons of late-Ming readers.

These publications played a formative role in shaping late-Ming worldviews by organizing knowledge around observable difference, material objects, and commodifiable information.[65] Shang Wei further demonstrates how such encyclopedic knowledge systems directly influenced the narrative forms of late-Ming fiction. In his study of *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (*The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 1617), he shows that novels increasingly incorporated lists, catalogues, and descriptive passages derived from daily-use encyclopedias, reflecting merchant values and everyday experiences shaped by commercial life.[66] As market mechanisms intensified, the widespread circulation of daily-use encyclopedias and other vernacular, market-oriented publications further shaped how readers imagined both themselves and foreign others.

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[63] He, *Home and the World*, 3.
[64] Lu Yilu 鹿憶鹿, *Yiyu, yiren, yishou: Shanhai jing zai Mingdai* 異域, 異人, 異獸：山海經在明代 [*Strange Lands, Strange Peoples, and Strange Beasts: The Classic of Mountains and Seas in the Ming Dynasty*] (Taipei: Xiuwei jingdian 秀威經典, 2021), 31.
[65] Ibid., 202–204.
[66] Wei Shang, "The Making of the Everyday World: *Jin Ping Mei cihua* and Encyclopedias for Daily Use," in *Dynastic Crisis and Cultural Innovation from the Late Ming to the Late Qing and Beyond* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 74, 77–79. Shang analyzed the 1617 edition of *Jin Ping Mei cihua* 金瓶梅詞話.

Scholars have further situated these developments within a macrohistorical framework shaped by the circulation of silver, examining how such material conditions influenced narrative forms and systems of value. In *The Age of Silver*, Ning Ma argues that the rise of realistic fiction—marked by a shift from inherited heroic and legendary narratives toward representations of individual experience within increasingly commercialized societies—across East Asia and Western Europe shared common roots in the expansion of global trade and the circulation of precious metals. Literary narratives of this period increasingly foreground material objects, economic relations, and commensurable values as structuring principles of social life.[67] Performance and drama studies likewise underscore the symbolic force of monetary forms. Ariel Fox demonstrates that silver ingots, copper coins, and paper currency functioned as theatrical props that rendered social relations visible and exchangeable, thereby enabling explorations of shifting subject positions, kinship structures, and political imaginaries. Material forms of value thus shaped not only economic behavior but also representational logic and modes of perception.[68]

Within this broader context of late-Ming book culture, scholars have further emphasized the adaptability of publishing and marketing practices. Suyoung Son shows how literati authors increasingly collaborated with commercial presses, negotiating between claims to moral authority and the demands of market circulation.[69] Scott Gregory, in turn, argues that formal variation and stylistic hybridity were integral to commercial publishing rather than signs of textual instability.[70] Although this body of scholarship does not directly

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[67] Ning Ma, *The Age of Silver: The Rise of the Novel East and West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.
[68] Ariel Fox, *The Cornucopian Stage: Performing Commerce in Early Modern China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2023), 41.
[69] Son, *Writing for Print*, 129. In *Writing for Print,* Suyoung Son examines the intricate interplay between peer patronage of literati circles and market value through the publication and circulation of works by two early-Qing literati, Zhang Chao (1650–ca. 1707) and Wang Zhuo (1636–ca. 1707).
[70] Scott W Gregory, *Bandits in Print: "The Water Margin" and the Transformations of the Chinese Novel* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2023), 5.

address *Sanbao*, it provides a theoretical framework for understanding how the circulation of silver informed the narrative imagination of late-Ming fiction. It also encourages a reconsideration of such fiction not merely as moral or allegorical writing, but as a medium deeply entangled with early modern economic systems.

Building on this framework, this dissertation situates *Sanbao* within the contexts of late-Ming print culture and global commercial networks, examining how the novel represents foreign commodities, systems of value, and regimes of exchange in ways that resemble the knowledge organization of daily-use encyclopedias. The text repeatedly foregrounds foreign goods in relation to their silver and material value, reflecting an emergent orientation toward a silver-based global economy. Moreover, when considered as a commodity within the commercial book market, *Sanbao*'s repetitive structure, relatively plain narrative style, and high density of illustrations may be understood as strategies that respond to market demands and readerly preferences.

Addressing multiple audiences simultaneously—elite readers attentive to political allegory, merchants engaged in commodity exchange, and consumers drawn to visuality—*Sanbao* occupies a dual position as both political allegory and market commodity. In this sense, it exemplifies the mediated condition of late-Ming fiction: a work shaped by the silver-driven, print-saturated environment that it both represents and interrogates. This early modern framework thus provides the material and commercial foundation for understanding how *Sanbao*'s political deployment of vision operates within a print market in which visual elements—such as illustrations and text—function as forms of advertisement shaped by consumption, exchange, and the circulation of mediated knowledge.

1.4 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This dissertation advances "political vision" as a method of interpretation by treating ocular motifs—such as mirrors, eyes, vision, and illusion—in *Sanbao* as a structuring

framework through which political judgment, authority, and misrecognition are narratively organized. Rather than approaching vision as a neutral sensory faculty or a merely decorative metaphor, this study conceptualizes acts of seeing, not seeing, and mis-seeing as historically conditioned operations that register tensions among competing systems of value and modes of worldmaking in the late Ming. In *Sanbao*, vision is neither transparent nor reliable; it is persistently mediated, deferred, and distorted. Ocular motifs thus function as narrative mechanisms through which political meaning is produced, negotiated, and destabilized.

Methodologically, this study is informed by Craig Clunas's analysis of late-Ming knowledge production. Craig Clunas cites Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518–1593) and his compilation of the *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 (*Compendium of Materia Medica*)—completed in 1578 and published in Nanjing in 1596—as an example of how late-Ming literati understood scholarly inquiry through the intellectual framework of the investigation of things (*gewu zhizhi* 格物致知) as a pathway to knowledge. According to Clunas, Li Shizhen and his contemporaries conceptualized knowledge as grounded in the observation, classification, and elucidation of material objects and natural phenomena.[71] Within this framework, this dissertation turns to Li Shizhen's discussion of mirrors in the *Bencao gangmu* as a conceptual point of departure for understanding late-Ming visuality. Building on this formulation, vision is understood not merely as the act of seeing, but as a mode of knowledge production encompassing processes of clarification, revelation, and evaluative judgment.

> [Explanation of Names]: The Chinese term *jian* [鑑] literally means "mirror(s)" or "*zhao zi*" (reflector). [Li] Shizhen says: *jing* [鏡], the mirror, is a pun on *jing* [景], view. It mirrors a scenery, *guang jing* 光景. *Jian* [鑑], the mirror, is a pun on *jian*

[71] Craig Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness: Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China, 1368-1644* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 113-114.

[監], to inspect. It serves to inspect what lies in front of it. 【釋名】鑑，照子。【時珍曰】鏡者，景也，有光景也。鑑者，監也，監於前也。[72]

Here, Li indicates that *jing* 鏡, mirror, may also be understood in relation to *jian* 鑑 and *zhaozi* 照子. He distinguishes between *jing*, which reflects visible forms, and *jian*, which connotes scrutiny, inspection, and judgment. The term *zhaozi*, literally "illuminating device," further extends beyond the physical mirror to encompass illumination more broadly and, by extension, the human eye, thereby forming a semantic network linking reflection, illumination, and observation. Within this conceptual framework, vision is not merely a sensory or semantic function but a cognitive method mediated through material forms. The mirror, as a medium, suggests that acts of seeing are not direct or transparent but are constituted through specific material conditions and perspectival arrangements. Vision, therefore, cannot be reduced to the act of seeing alone; rather, it is inseparable from processes of judgment, revelation, evaluation, and discernment, serving as a crucial means through which knowledge and value are recognized and assessed.

Building on this conceptual framework, this dissertation examines recurring ocular motifs in *Sanbao*—including mirrors, eyes, blindness, and illusion—as narrative mechanisms through which political authority, moral judgment, and competing modes of perception and knowledge are questioned. These visual forms do not merely decorate the narrative but actively structure how political meaning is produced and interpreted. This analysis foregrounds the coexistence of two perceptual logics structuring the novel's political imagination. On the one hand, *Sanbao* draws upon a literati tradition in which "discernment" (*shi* 識)—the capacity to recognize persons, signs, and historical precedents correctly—

[72] Li Shizhen (1518-1593), *Bencao Gangmu* (*The Compendium of Materia Medica*)*: Waters, Fires, Soils, Metals, Jades, Stones, Minerals, Salts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021), 303. See Vol. 2. Chapter 8-16, "Section Metals and Stones: *Gu jing* (ancient mirror)."

grounds moral judgment and legitimate governance. Within this framework, correct seeing entails the interpretation of signs, the identification of value, and the assessment of authority according to historically established criteria; political failure is thus articulated less as blindness than as misrecognition.

On the other hand, the novel is embedded in a historical environment transformed by commercial expansion, silver-based valuation, and the intensified circulation of goods and knowledge. Within this context, perception becomes increasingly conditioned by exchangeability, material visibility, and commensurable value. Characters frequently evaluate the world in terms of profit, return, and silver equivalence rather than exclusively through Confucian ethical hierarchies grounded in loyalty and virtue. Tribute objects function simultaneously as ritual offerings and as commodities within global trade networks, while the imagery of gold and silver juxtaposes moral authority with material temptation. These tensions reveal a fundamental disjunction between symbolic legitimacy and economic value: what appears valuable may not align with moral authority, and what is visible may obscure rather than reveal political substance.

By approaching ocular motifs as structurally and historically situated devices, this dissertation demonstrates that *Sanbao* transforms vision into a site where political legitimacy, economic value, and cultural hierarchy are actively negotiated rather than stabilized. Vision thus becomes a medium through which late-Ming anxieties surrounding governance, commerce, and global encounter are rendered visible yet remain unresolved. In this sense, perception itself emerges as a central arena in which competing systems of knowledge and value are brought into tension.

1.5 Structure of the Dissertation and Scholarly Contribution

This dissertation is organized around a progressive recalibration of vision—understood not as a physiological faculty, but as a mode of political judgment shaped by history, value

systems, and media forms. Across five body chapters and an epilogue, the study traces how *Sanbao* stages shifts in ways of seeing as late-Ming China negotiated tensions between inherited Sinocentric ideals and the pressures of commercial expansion and global circulation. Each chapter examines a distinct ocular motif through which political authority, legitimacy, and moral discernment are tested, deferred, or transformed.

Chapter 2 examines the mirror as a foundational model of political vision. Drawing on the Confucian principle of "taking history as a mirror," this chapter argues that Luo Maodeng structures *Sanbao* as a work of political admonition modeled on historiographical practice, particularly the *Zizhi tongjian*. By reworking the legend of the imperial jade seal—splitting He's jade and relocating the lost seal to the western seas—the novel transforms historical reflection into an allegorical critique of late-Ming governance.[73] Read against the context of the Wanli succession dispute, the mirror emerges as a device through which imperial desire, Daoist institutional influence, and political disorder are rendered visible and subject to judgment. In this sense, *Sanbao* functions as a political mirror that enables the author to articulate the responsibility of admonishing the emperor while reiterating the ideal of moral governance.

Chapter 3 shifts from reflective vision to embodied sight by examining the eye as a site where perception is entangled with value. Through the episodes of the Golden-Eye and Silver-Eye Kingdoms, the chapter argues that *Sanbao* visualizes competing late-Ming value orders—between Sinocentric moral hierarchies and an emerging silver-based global economy—through bodily difference. On the one hand, the novel adopts a Sinocentric framework that classifies the Han self and foreign others through visible markers, particularly

[73] The Heshi Bi (He's jade) is a legendary jade artifact associated with political legitimacy in Chinese history. According to historical records, Bian He discovered the jade concealed within an uncut stone, but its value was not recognized until the reign of King Wen of Chu. After the Qin unification of the Six States in 221 BCE, the jade was said to have been carved into the Imperial Seal of the First Emperor of Qin, becoming a symbol of dynastic authority and the Mandate of Heaven. Historical accounts repeatedly record the seal's loss and recovery, reflecting its enduring significance as an emblem of political orthodoxy and sovereign power.

the eyes. On the other hand, as gold and silver circulate as currency, they signify systems of economic valuation. When “golden” and “silver” eyes become bodily traits, economic value, ethnic classification, and moral judgment converge, rendering the body a visible site of valuation. This chapter explores tensions between monetary calculation and moral expectation through contrasting episodes, where the body is alternately framed as an object of economic valuation and as a medium of ethical expression through sacrifice.

Chapter 4 examines illusion as a dominant visual mode through supernatural visions involving ghosts, phoenixes, and phoenix eggs. Situating these episodes within early Chinese omen theory, the chapter argues that *Sanbao* employs deferred, obstructed, or displaced vision to critique the foundations of imperial legitimacy. Through the figure of Wang Ming and his encounters with exemplary but misrecognized signs, the novel stages political failure as a problem of discernment rather than ignorance. The repeated displacement of the phoenix—an emblem of sage rule—outside Ming territory further underscores the narrative’s skepticism toward the dynasty’s capacity to realize ideal governance, transforming vision into a space of anticipation, anxiety, and doubt.

While the first three chapters focus on narrative and symbolic modes of vision, Chapters 5 and 6 shift attention to focus how the commercial book market shaped how *Sanbao* was produced, seen, read, and consumed. Chapter 5 situates the novel within late-Ming commercial print culture, arguing that *Sanbao* represents a hybrid form that combines literati narrative structures with stylistic and informational strategies drawn from the marketplace. By examining its connections to Nanjing publishers, its resonance with daily-use encyclopedias, and its accessible, orally-inflected prose, the chapter shows how Luo Maodeng strategically expanded readership while negotiating tensions between elite moral discourse and commercial appeal.

Chapter 6 turns to illustration as a crucial site of visual mediation. Focusing on the Wanli edition, this chapter argues that images functioned not merely as supplements to the text, but as visual commodities that shaped the novel's commercial life within the Nanjing print industry. Through inclusive religious imagery and repeated affirmations of imperial authority, illustrations operated as marketing devices designed to attract broader audiences. At the same time, material traces of production—repetitive templates, carving errors, reused images, and divergences between image and text—reveal how market pressures transformed illustration into both a promotional and interpretive force.

The epilogue returns to the question of vision through the figures of the Gold Child and Silver Child, whose desire to "see China" encapsulates the unresolved tensions explored throughout the dissertation. Their longing gestures toward a world in which cultural authority, value, and knowledge are no longer anchored solely in the imperial center, but shaped by circulation, commerce, and global imagination. By concluding with this open-ended desire to see, the dissertation underscores that vision in *Sanbao* is never fully stabilized; it remains a contested process through which political meaning is continually recalibrated in a changing world.

This dissertation adopts an integrative analytical approach that establishes a dialogic framework between traditional Confucian political ethics and the value systems shaped by early-modern monetization and global circulation. It argues that *Sanbao* does not articulate a single political or religious position. Rather, the novel persistently negotiates the tension between a Sinocentric moral order and an increasingly pluralized world imagination, reflecting late-Ming transformations in political ideals, economic structures, and modes of global awareness.

The contributions of this dissertation unfold along four primary dimensions. First, at the level of economy and valuation, this dissertation argues that the novel repeatedly employs

silver as a standard of measurement, incorporating overseas commodities into a commensurable system of exchange and comparison. Through this analytical framework, the study demonstrates how the narrative registers a historical shift in which foreign goods move from functioning as ritualized and hierarchical symbols to becoming integrated within a monetary system, thereby revealing how tribute objects and overseas commodities are reconfigured within a silver-based global economy.

Second, at the level of visuality, this study demonstrates that the novel translates economic value into visible bodily markers through motifs of "colored eyes," such as the Golden-Eyes and Silver-Eyes kingdoms. Through an analysis of these ocular motifs, the project explores how transformations of value under global circulation are materialized as changes in mechanisms of seeing and judging. In this framework, vision functions as a medium through which economic commensurability and cultural difference are rendered perceptible.

Third, at the level of power, the dissertation examines how the narrative trajectory shifts from an early reliance on religious and supernatural forms of legitimation toward a later emphasis on perception, visibility, and interpretive frameworks. Through this analysis, the study argues that the novel reconfigures imperial authority not simply as a matter of divine mandate or military force, but as a form of influence embedded in modes of seeing and understanding. By analyzing how characters interpret the world through inherited Sino-centric perspectives alongside emerging forms of material consciousness shaped by profit, commercial exchange, and market-oriented systems of value, the dissertation demonstrates how vision functions as a subtle mechanism shaping political and cultural consciousness.

Finally, this dissertation examines how *Sanbao* merges literary imagination with forms of empirical knowledge associated with Zheng He's maritime voyages, incorporating geographical descriptions, foreign objects, tribute goods, and accounts of overseas regions

into a fictional narrative framework. At the same time, the dissertation situates the novel within the commercial print culture of the late Ming through its hundred-chapter architecture, narrative repetition, encyclopedic accumulation, and dense visual program shaped by market-oriented publishing strategies. By bringing literary form, visual representation, and early-modern socio-historical transformation into a single analytical framework, this dissertation repositions *Sanbao* within late-Ming literary and print culture. It demonstrates how political ideals, market mechanisms, and global imaginaries intersect and operate simultaneously within the narrative logic of the novel.

CHAPTER II

"MIRRORING" THE STATE –THE EVOLUTION AND POLITICAL IMPLICATION OF THE LEGENDARY IMPERIAL SEAL IN *THE EUNUCH SANBAO'S JOURNEYS IN THE WESTERN SEAS*

As the late-Ming print industry flourished, many literati who had become disillusioned with the civil service examinations turned instead to publishing or other cultural enterprises rather than pursuing official careers. During the reign of the Wanli emperor, the proliferation of vernacular novels reached new heights. Among them, *Sanbao*, a hundred-chapter novel attributed to Luo Maodeng, was published around the twenty-fifth year of the Wanli reign (1597).[74] The work is loosely based on the historical voyages commissioned by the Yongle emperor, who dispatched the eunuch Zheng He to the "Western Seas," traversing regions across Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

Scholars have long observed that private historiography stimulated the emergence of fiction in late imperial China.[75] Situated at the intersection of historical and fictional discourses, *Sanbao* exemplifies what Peter Ditmanson terms a growing "historical consciousness"—a heightened curiosity about the empire's past and its governing principles. This sensibility, combined with the late-Ming expansion of the print marketplace, encouraged the creation of "private histories" of the court, a phenomenon that began in the Jiajing era 嘉

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[74] The details of Luo Maodeng's life are unknown. As a result of Nanjing proverbs used in the novel *Sanbao*, Xiang Da suggested Luo likely lived in Nanjing. Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936) suggested in chapter 18, "Ming zhi shenmo xiaoshuo xia" 明之神魔小說下[Ming Dynasty Novels About Gods and Devils (Part II)] that Luo Maodeng is the writer of *The Eunuch Sanbao* due to Luo's preface in the novel. He also noted that the novel *Sanbao* was written at a time when Japanese pirates harassed China and the Ming people were outraged by the government's incompetence. See Lu Xun, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shi lüe* 中國小說史略 [*A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*], translated by Hsien-Yi Yang and Gladys Yang (Peking: Foreign Languages Press,1959), 224; Xiang Da 向達, "Lun Luo Maodeng zhu *Sanbao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi*" 論羅懋登著三寶太監西洋記通俗演義, reprinted in Luo Maodeng, *Sanbao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi* 三寶太監西洋記通俗演義 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985), 1293.

[75] Judith. T. Zeitlin. *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford: Sandford University Press, 1993), 1. See note 2.

靖 (1521–1567) and reached its zenith during the Wanli era. These works frequently explored the emperor's decisions, the dynamics of succession, and the moral legitimacy of imperial authority.[76]

Such "dynastic anxiety," as Andrew Plaks and Scott Gregory have noted, also permeated the fiction of the period. Plaks observes that the major Ming novels were "deeply enmeshed in the exploration of historical issues,"[77] while Gregory characterizes many "present-dynasty novels" as vehicles for expressing political anxieties.[78] The Ming literati had ample reason for such concern: the Yongle emperor's usurpation, the Jiajing emperor's Daoist obsession and involvement in the Great Rites Controversy, and the Wanli emperor's protracted succession dispute each destabilized the moral and political foundations of the dynasty. Against this backdrop, late-Ming novelists channeled their apprehensions about imperial legitimacy and moral governance into narrative form.

Following this trend of consciously composing "private histories," Luo Maodeng's *Sanbao* may be read as an intentional political mirror modeled after Sima Guang's *Zizhi tongjian*, which, as I argue, Luo deliberately and meticulously invoked within the novel. I contend that Luo conceived *Sanbao* as an admonitory text designed to reflect upon the political turbulence and violence that imperiled dynastic succession, thereby offering an implicit critique of contemporary imperial governance. The novel's allusions to the Jiajing emperor's Daoist excesses and, more pointedly, to the Wanli succession crisis, underscore Luo's deep engagement with questions of moral authority, imperial conduct, and the legitimacy of rule.

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[76] Peter Ditmanson, "*Imperial History and Broadening Historical Consciousness in Late Ming China*," *Ming Studies* 71 (2015), 24.
[77] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks*, 266.
[78] Gregory, "Daydreaming Dynasty, 13,15.

To critique the turn towards materialism as a threat to dynastic integrity in the late Ming, within the narrative, the Ming voyage pursues two intertwined goals: the recovery of the lost imperial seal and the demonstration of Ming superiority to the "Western Seas countries." Both objectives are politically charged—one directed inward toward the affirmation of dynastic legitimacy, and the other outward toward the assertion of imperial authority over "foreign lands" (*fan bang* 番邦). The expedition thus becomes an allegory for the search for legitimacy itself, reflecting both political and cultural dimensions of Ming self-definition. By transforming a historical voyage into a moral allegory, Luo reconfigures the Zheng He voyage into a commentary on contemporary imperial governance. In doing so, *Sanbao* exemplifies what Andrew Plaks describes as the literary strategy of "putting old wine into new bottles": adapting previous material into a new narrative form that expresses the author's ideological and political concerns.[79] The result is a richly layered fiction that uses the veneer of historical adventure to critique the moral and dynastic crises of the late Ming.

2.1 From Official History to Fictional and Political Allegory

The voyage in *Sanbao* begins with the Yongle emperor's fictional quest for the lost imperial seal (*chuanguo xi* 傳國璽), a symbol of dynastic legitimacy and sovereign authority. Celestial Master Zhang makes his first appearance at court to recount the history of the seal, claiming that the last Yuan emperor absconded with it, and that it was subsequently lost somewhere in the "Western Seas." Intrigued by this revelation, the Yongle emperor commissions a grand maritime expedition to recover the relic, setting the novel's central voyage in motion.

[79] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, preface x, 71.

As noted earlier, both Peter Ditmanson and Scott Gregory emphasize the complex interplay between late-Ming writings and a broader cultural trend of "historical consciousness" or "dynastic anxiety" concerning the imperium—manifested in private court histories as well as in contemporary fiction.[80] Gregory, in particular, interprets the motif of the lost imperial seal as emblematic of late-Ming anxieties about dynastic legitimacy in the aftermath of the Yuan–Ming transition. [81] In contrast, Sarah Schneewind argues that the crisis surrounding the seal is ultimately resolved rather than, as Gregory suggests, dismissed as "inconsequential." Drawing attention to the closing scenes in which "all the animals have been turned to use or put out to pasture; the birds have been let go; the useful items distributed to officials; and the expensive items hidden away in storehouses," Schneewind contends that the Yongle emperor ultimately awakens from his delusion and recognizes that true legitimacy derives not from the possession of a physical relic, but from his duty to secure the welfare of his people.[82] Building on her argument, I suggest that Luo Maodeng's concerns extend beyond the symbolic recovery of legitimacy to encompass the political turmoil and violence that imperiled the continuity of the Ming imperial line. These anxieties find implicit expression in *Sanbao* through allusions to the Jiajing emperor's Daoist excesses, the Wanli emperor's prolonged succession dispute, and perhaps even an oblique reference to the Yongle emperor's own usurpation of the throne.

Schneewind's interpretation resonates with contemporary historical perspectives. For instance, in the *Ming shi* 明史 (*History of Ming*), an official named Zhou advised the founding Hongwu emperor (1328–1398) that he should pursue the true "great seal of governance" (da xi 大璽)—the moral responsibility of caring for the people—rather than the

[80] Gregory, "Daydreaming Dynasty," 13, 15.
[81] Ibid., 19.
[82] Schneewind, "Response to Scott Gregory," 102.

"small, lost seal" (xiao xi 小璽) of the Qin dynasty.[83] Schneewind's analysis thus reflects broader late-Ming scholarly discourses that equated moral virtue and benevolent rule with dynastic legitimacy.[84] While I concur that Luo ultimately envisions a Confucian ideal of governance—specifically an ancient sage-king paradigm—it is noteworthy that within the novel's expeditionary corps, the figure representing the scholar-official class, the Vice Commander Minister Wang, is minimally developed and remains a flat, static character. This conspicuous absence of literati voices may serve as an ironic commentary on both the fictional world of *Sanbao* and Luo's contemporary society—an era depicted as having strayed from the Confucian moral order and descending into ethical decay. Both official histories and unofficial anecdotes recount that Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 (259–210 BCE; r. 221–210 BCE), the founder of the Qin dynasty, commissioned the imperial jade seal to be carved from the He's jade (*Heshibi* 和氏璧), which was subsequently passed down through successive dynasties. Historical records further note that the seal was lost and recovered multiple times amid dynastic overthrows.[85] Luo Maodeng not only integrates these historical traditions into his narrative but also assigns Celestial Master Zhang a specific textual source for his knowledge of the seal—Sima Guang's *Zizhi tongjian*. I propose that, by explicitly invoking this historiographical authority in Celestial Master Zhang's presentation of the imperial seal to the Yongle emperor, the novelist positions *Sanbao* as a literary counterpart to that esteemed historical work. In doing so, he embeds the novel within a moral and historical framework that mirrors the didactic function of the *Zizhi tongjian*, thereby transforming *Sanbao*, as I suggest, into a work of political allegory as well as imaginative fiction.

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[83] Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉, *Ming shi: [juan 332]*. Edited by Yang Jialuo 楊家駱 (Taipei: Dingwen shuju 鼎文書局, 1980), 6713. See bibliography of Zhou Jingxin 周敬心.

[84] Schneewind, "Response to Scott Gregory," 102.

[85] A number of scattered records about the imperial seal can be found in the official histories, including *Shiji* 史記 [*Records of the Grand Historian*], *Hanshu* 漢書 [*Book of Han*], *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 [*Book of the Later Han*], *Zizhi tongjian* [*Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*], etc. There are also anecdotes and short articles written by scholars about the topic.

> Celestial Master Zhang said: "It's an imperial seal (*chuanguo bao*., lit. "Treasure of the Country's Succession" or the imperial treasure)[86] that has been handed down." The Lord of the Myriad Years (referring to the emperor)[87] said: "Has this imperial seal been recorded in any of the classical texts?" Celestial Master Zhang said: "It's recorded in the *Zizhi tongjian.*" The emperor then said: "Among the teachings of the Three Religions and the writings of the Nine Schools, the sacred classics and the works of the sages, and the texts of the various philosophers—there is not a single book I have not read. How is it, then, that I have never encountered any mention of this imperial seal?" 天師道：「叫做個傳國寶。」萬歲爺道：「這傳國寶可載在典籍上麼？」天師道：「就載在《資治通鑑》上。」萬歲爺道：「三教九流，聖經賢傳，諸子百家，哪一本書朕不曾過眼，怎麼不曾看見這個傳國寶哩？」[88]

Throughout *Sanbao*, Celestial Master Zhang, representing the Daoist tradition, serves as the sole authority who provides information concerning the origin of the imperial seal. No other figure in the narrative offers further explanation or corroboration. This exclusivity implies a long-standing connection between Daoism and political authority—a relationship that becomes more apparent as the narrative unfolds. The novel reveals that the imperial seal was fashioned from the central portion of He's jade, while the remaining two fragments were later transformed into seals held since the Han dynasty by two major Daoist sects: the Celestial Masters of Mount Longhu (龍虎山) and the Maoshan (茅山) tradition. In *Sanbao*, both sects are depicted as recipients of imperial favor, granted lands or titles by the court as tokens of recognition.[89] Such depictions underscore the intimate bond between Daoism and state power, suggesting that Luo Maodeng intentionally foregrounds this interrelation to

[86] As the imperial seal is referred to in two different ways in the novel *Sanbao*, "*Chuanguo bao*" (the imperial treasure) and "*Chuanguo xi*" (the imperial seal), I will translate the term "Chuanguo bao" uniformly as "the imperial seal" in the following sections to avoid misunderstandings.
[87] In the following translations, I will uniformly translate this term as "the Emperor."
[88] Luo, *Sanbao*, 9: 110.
[89] Ibid., 9: 112-113.

reflect on the historical entanglement of religion and politics in the construction of dynastic legitimacy.

As Celestial Master Zhang asserts, his knowledge of the imperial seal derives from the *Zizhi tongjian*. Yet, despite his self-proclaimed erudition and familiarity with a vast corpus of texts, the Yongle emperor surprisingly professes that he knows nothing about this "precious treasure." It may imply both his potential ignorance of the text of political admonition and the possible suggestions of his subordinates and officials. Although the *Zizhi tongjian* indeed incorporates numerous official histories and earlier records that refer to the imperial seal, it is neither the earliest nor the most comprehensive source on the subject. Nor is it, strictly speaking, the most appropriate text from which such information would be drawn. For instance, Celestial Master Zhang recounts the story of Qin Shihuang commissioning the imperial seal to be carved from He's jade—a legend that predates the Song dynasty but is notably absent from the *Zizhi tongjian*.[90] Moreover, the few references to the imperial seal within the *Zizhi tongjian* are dispersed across isolated chapters and passages, none of which provide a sustained or detailed account of its origin or transmission. Taken together, these factors render the *Zizhi tongjian* an unlikely and imperfect source for authoritative information about the imperial seal.

It therefore appears that Luo Maodeng deliberately designates the *Zizhi tongjian* as the source of the imperial seal in his novel for a specific symbolic purpose, given that the *Zizhi tongjian* is by no means the most appropriate or authoritative textual source on the subject. Commissioned and titled by Emperor Song Shenzong 宋神宗 (r. 1067–1085), the *Zizhi tongjian* was intended to serve as a moral and political guide for rulers, as expressed in its

[90] For example, *Shiji zhengyi* 史記正義, written by Zhang Shoujie 張守節 (Tang, ?–?) in the Tang dynasty. It records that, according to Cui Hao 崔浩(381-450), "Li Si ground He's jade into the so-called imperial jade (*Chuanguo xi*) that was handed down by the emperors of the Han Dynasty." 李斯磨和璧作之，漢諸帝世傳服之，謂傳國璽. See Sima Qian 司馬遷 (Han, 145–ca. 86 BCE), and Zhang Shoujie *zhengyi*. *Shiji* (Taipei: Dingwen Shuju, 1981), 227.

preface: “By reflecting on past events, one gains assistance in the principles of governance.”[91] In invoking this historiographical work, Luo underscores its function as an emperor’s manual for moral reflection and effective rule. I therefore argue that Luo consciously fashions *Sanbao* as a work of political and moral didacticism parallel to the *Zizhi tongjian*—a narrative designed to mirror, admonish, and instruct the contemporary Wanli emperor in the proper conduct of governance.

The author reiterates the significance of the *Zizhi tongjian* in Chapter 58, where a wooden tiger-headed tablet (*hutou pai* 虎頭牌)—a symbol of high-ranking Ming officials—speaks for the only time in the novel. Inscribed on its reverse are the two official purposes of the Ming expedition: to recover the imperial seal and to pacify foreign lands. Each time the Ming army encounters outsiders, the officers display the tablet and recite its inscription aloud. Although the object is nominally associated with the bureaucratic hierarchy of the Ming state, its narrative function extends beyond that of an administrative emblem; it becomes a symbolic manifestation of imperial authority and a visible representation of Ming power before foreign polities.

When Wang Ming, a prominent solider who plays a crucial role in the latter half of the novel, is ordered to investigate foreign kingdoms using his magical instrument—the “Invisibility Grass”—he carries the tiger-headed tablet with him. Initially lamenting the absence of his sword, he is astonished to discover that the wooden tablet can speak. During their exchange, the tiger-headed tablet asks Wang whether he has read Hu Sanxing’s 胡三省 (1230–1302) annotated edition of the *Tongjian* 通鑑—an abbreviated reference to the *Zizhi tongjian*—and pointedly mocks him for his ignorance of the proverb “sweet in speech but a sword in the belly” (*koumi fujian* 口蜜腹劍), which it claims derives from Hu’s

[91] Lin, “Tong gujin zhi bian,” 46.

commentary. The term describes a person who conceals malicious intent beneath courteous words. Wang responds with irony, retorting, “You are but a painted tiger’s head; how can your whiskers move and your mouth speak?” (你不過是個畫成的老虎頭，怎麼鬚會搖，口會講話) [92]

Although the exchange unfolds in a playful and humorous register, it carries a deeper allegorical resonance. Not only does Wang Ming’s name form a reverse pun—“Ming Wang” 明王, literally “King of the Ming state”—foregrounding his symbolic association with imperial sovereignty, but his narrative function also extends beyond that of a mere military assistant. In the second half of the novel, Wang Ming plays a decisive role in facilitating Ming expansion, repeatedly deploying the Invisibility Grass to subdue foreign polities. Through this ability to render himself unseen and manipulate perception, he enacts a form of control that operates not solely through open force but through strategic concealment and intervention. In this sense, Wang Ming can be read as an allegorical figure of Ming rule, embodying an imperial logic that combines symbolic authority, technological advantage, and indirect domination in its engagement with the foreign.

This allegorical dimension is further reinforced in a more self-reflexive register through the semantic resonance of his name. The character *ming* 明, meaning “enlightened,” aligns Wang Ming with ideals of sagely clarity and political discernment traditionally associated with rulership. Yet, when placed alongside the tiger-headed tablet—an emblem of bureaucratic authority—the interaction assumes a subtly ironic and suggestive tone. As a low-origin soldier, Wang Ming would not be expected to have read the *Zizhi tongjian*, a text conventionally associated with the ruling elite, literati, and officials. It is therefore particularly striking that the tiger-headed tablet poses precisely this question to him. This

[92] Luo, *Sanbao*, 58: 752.

incongruity not only heightens the scene's humor but also foregrounds a deeper irony: although Wang Ming is symbolically aligned with structures of governance and the Ming imperial order, he demonstrates neither access to nor mastery of the canonical knowledge that ostensibly underpins legitimate rule. This absence finds a revealing parallel in an episode in which even the Yongle Emperor appears unfamiliar with the origin of the imperial seal, which Celestial Master Zhang claims is recorded in the *Zizhi tongjian*.

Beneath its comedic surface, this interaction can be read as a metaphorical exchange between the official and the ruler, invoking the Confucian ideal of remonstrance, in which loyal ministers admonish their sovereigns through indirect speech. The irony that Wang Ming—the "King of the Ming"—has not read the *Tongjian* mirrors the earlier scene in which the Yongle emperor also professes unfamiliarity with the same text. This parallel underscores the novel's moral undertone: rulers who claim the mantle or potential of enlightenment may nonetheless fail to embody its essence. Viewed in this light, the episode illuminates Luo Maodeng's deliberate invocation of the *Zizhi tongjian* as a model for moral reflection and political admonition, thereby reinforcing *Sanbao*'s broader function as a work of didactic historiographical fiction.

2.2 The Rewriting and Adaptation of the Imperial Seal Legend

While only limited information about the imperial seal appears in the *Zizhi tongjian*, a number of earlier texts predating the Song dynasty discuss the subject in greater detail. These works provide substantially more comprehensive accounts of the imperial seal's history, material composition, and transmission, and the descriptions found in *Sanbao* closely resemble those earlier narratives. It is therefore plausible that Luo Maodeng drew upon these pre-Song sources, even though he does not explicitly cite them within the novel. For instance, the *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文 (*Complete Prose Works of the Tang Dynasty*) preserves two

relevant texts: *Yuxi ji* 玉璽記 (*Record of the Jade Seal*) by the renowned Tang official Chu Suiliang 褚遂良 (596–658), and *Yuxi shu* 玉璽述 (*Account of the Jade Seal*), attributed to an anonymous court historian of the Later Zhou dynasty (953).[93] Both essays offer detailed discussions of the origins, succession, and whereabouts of the imperial jade seals across dynastic transitions. In *Yuxi ji*, for example, Chu Suiliang provides a systematic account of the seal's historical trajectory and symbolic significance.

> Emperor Qin Shihuang, after unifying the realm, took Zhao's jade and had it carved into the imperial seal. Measuring four inches square, the seal bore a knob in the form of five intertwined dragons. It was said to signify that the emperor had "received the Mandate of Heaven and would enjoy longevity and eternal prosperity." The inscription, written in small seal script (*xiaozhuan*) by the Prime Minister Li Si, was engraved with coiling dragon patterns and read, "Bestowed by Heaven, may the emperor enjoy longevity and prosperity." Passed down through successive generations, it came to be known as the *chuanguo xi* 傳國璽 (referring to "Imperial Seal," literally "Seal of the Country's Succession"). After the fall of the Qin dynasty, the seal was inherited by the Han. During Wang Mang's (r. 9–23 CE) usurpation of the throne, however, Empress Dowager Yuan (71 BCE–13 CE) hurled the seal to the ground in defiance, chipping a corner. 秦始皇既并天下，取趙璧琢而為之，方四寸，紐五盤龍面，曰：受命于天，既壽永昌。丞相李斯之小篆也。璽上隱起為盤龍文，曰：受天之命，皇帝壽昌。歷代傳之，謂曰傳國璽也。秦滅傳漢，歷王莽，為元后投之於地。一角小缺。[94]

The description of the imperial seal in *Sanbao* bears remarkable similarities to that found in Chu Suiliang's *Yuxi ji*. Luo Maodeng adopts key details from the earlier account, including the seal's symbolism of dynastic inheritance as well as its origin, form, and inscriptional style.[95] Comparable intertextual references to the legend of the imperial seal can

[93] Dong Guo 董誥, *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文(Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1987), 11051-2.
[94] Ibid., 1513-1.
[95] Luo, *Sanbao*, 9: 111.

also be found in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.[96] However, Luo extends and elaborates upon this legend in *Sanbao*, providing a more expansive and imaginative rendition of its origin:

> After Emperor Qin Shihuang had annexed the six kingdoms, he obtained this jade. In the twenty-sixth year of his reign, he summoned the finest craftsmen from across the empire and ordered them to divide the jade into three sections. The central section was polished and fashioned into the emperor's Imperial Seal, measuring approximately four inches across. At its top, five intertwined dragons were carved into the design, and upon its face, the Prime Minister Li Si engraved eight characters in small seal script (*xiaozhuan*): "Mandate endowed by Heaven, Wealth and Longevity, Eternal Flourishing." The left section was ground into the shape of a seal with a straight, vertically positioned knob. Upon this vertical knob were two points that emitted light, resembling the bright, piercing eyes of a human being. The right section was likewise shaped into a seal, but with a horizontally placed knob that radiated a dazzling glow. These two side sections, however, were never inscribed with any characters. 後來秦始皇併吞六國，得了這玉，到了二十六年上，揀選天下良工，把這塊玉解為三段，中一段，碾做一個天子的傳國璽，方圓約有四寸，頂上鐫一個五龍交紐，面上李斯鐫八個篆字。是哪八個篆字？是『受命於天，富壽永昌』八個篆字。左一段，碾做一個印形，其紐直豎，直豎紐上有兩點放光，如人的雙目炯炯。右一段，碾做一個印形，其紐橫撇，橫撇紐上霞光燦燦。這兩段卻不曾鐫刻文字。[97]

The rewriting of the imperial seal legend in *Sanbao* centers on two major innovations. First, *Sanbao* records that He's Jade was divided into three parts. In addition to the central section fashioned into the imperial seal, the remaining two portions—designated as the left and right sections—are later transformed into Daoist seals within the narrative. This motif is unique to *Sanbao*, appearing neither in earlier historical texts nor in the *Romance of the Three*

[96] Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中, *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 (Taipei: Lianjing chuban,1980), 6: 48–49.
[97] Luo, *Sanbao*, 9: 111.

Kingdoms. Second, no extant historical record supports the claim that the imperial seal was lost in the "Western Seas." Emperor Shun (r. 1333–1370) of the Yuan dynasty neither journeyed westward nor brought the seal to those regions. According to the *Ming shi*, after the Ming army defeated the retreating Mongol royal family, a northern tribal leader presented the imperial seal—acquired from the Yuan dynasty—to the Xuande Emperor 宣德皇帝 (r. 1425–1435) in exchange for recognition by the Ming court.[98]

Shen Defu 沈德符 (1578–1642), in his *Wanli yehuo bian* 萬曆野獲編 (*Gleanings from the Wanli Era*), includes an essay titled "The Beginning and End of the Qin Seal" (*Qinxi shimo* 秦璽始末), which claims that Emperor Shun of the Yuan carried the imperial seal with him and lost it in the desert.[99] Apart from *Sanbao*, no surviving text asserts that the seal was lost in the Western Seas. These two elements—the tripartite division of He's Jade and the relocation of the seal's disappearance to the maritime frontier—are original to Luo Maodeng's rewriting. The following sections will examine these innovations and their possible symbolic and ideological implications within the novel's broader framework.

The Tripartite Division of He's Jade: Two Daoist Seals

The author of *Sanbao* introduces a fictional detail in which Emperor Qin Shihuang orders He's jade to be divided into three parts. According to Chapter 9 of *Sanbao*, while traveling to Dongting Lake 洞庭湖, Qin Shihuang encounters violent winds and turbulent tides. To pacify the waters, he first commands that the right section of He's jade be cast into the lake. When the storm persists, he orders the left section to be thrown in as well, and finally, to completely subdue the waves, he casts the imperial seal itself into the lake. Eight years later, a mysterious figure returns the imperial seal to Qin Shihuang but vanishes when

[98] Zhang, *Ming shi*, 8498-8499.
[99] Shen Defu 沈德符, *Wanli yehuo bian* 萬曆野獲編 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 907-908. See "The Beginning and End of the Qin Seal 秦璽始末".

the emperor demands the retrieval of the remaining two fragments of jade.[100] Thus, although the imperial seal is recovered, the two accompanying sections are forever lost to the waters.

In *Sanbao*'s fictional account, these two lost pieces later reappear as sacred artifacts within Daoist traditions. According to Celestial Master Zhang, the left fragment of jade was bestowed upon a Daoist recluse, Mao Ying 茅盈, by an old man during the Han dynasty. Mao subsequently established the Maoshan 茅山 school of Daoism, commissioned artisans to fashion the jade into the sect's representative seal, and, together with his two brothers—who abandoned their official posts to join him in Daoist cultivation—attained immortality. Their disciples continued their legacy, inheriting both the seal and imperial recognition, along with extensive land grants from the court. Likewise, the right fragment follows a parallel trajectory. When Zhang Daoling 張道陵 (traditionally 34–156 CE), the founder of the Celestial Masters sect on Mount Longhu 龍虎山, was refining elixirs in the mountains, he captured a ghost king and thereby obtained the right section of He's jade. After being granted the title of the Celestial Master (*Tianshi* 天師) by the Han emperor, the jade was carved into the official seal of his sect, and each successive Celestial Master Zhang inherited it as a symbol of authority. [101]

Accordingly, the fictional detail in *Sanbao* that both sections of He's jade are transformed into Daoist seals and receive imperial recognition may reflect, as discussed earlier, the longstanding association between the imperial court and Daoism, a relationship traceable to the Han dynasty. The two Daoist sects, Maoshan and the Celestial Masters of Mount Longhu, may have originated as independent religious communities that were later incorporated into the political and institutional framework of imperial governance. When they first receive the jade in the narrative, however, both Mao Ying and Zhang Daoling are

[100] Luo, *Sanbao*, 9: 111.
[101] Ibid., 9: 112-114.

portrayed as recluses devoted to spiritual cultivation, deliberately detached from worldly affairs and political authority.

Despite both figures obtaining fragments of the jade and transforming them into sectarian seals, their ultimate fates, however, diverge. When the Yongle emperor later seeks to retrieve the two Daoist jade seals as substitutes for the lost imperial seal, Celestial Master Zhang explains that his sect has lost its "path to Heaven" and no longer possesses access to the physical seal.[102] While this statement may be read as an attempt to evade the emperor's demand, it can also be interpreted as carrying Luo Maodeng's implicit critique of Daoism—particularly the Celestial Masters of Mount Longhu—for their increasing entanglement in secular society and their detrimental influence on imperial politics and the moral integrity of the throne.

Within the political and social context in which Luo Maodeng was writing, the novel's portrayal of Daoism's close ties to imperial authority gains deeper significance—particularly in light of the Jiajing Emperor's (r. 1521–1567) fervent Daoist devotion. The emperor's obsession with Daoist teachings led him to seek physical immortality through esoteric regimens, elaborate rituals, and alchemical experimentation. His excessive patronage of Daoist projects, including the construction of large ritual complexes, placed heavy financial and labor burdens on the empire, draining public resources and threatening the livelihood of his subjects.[103] He further surrounded himself with sycophants (*ningxing* 佞倖) skilled in alchemy and the preparation of elixirs of longevity, relying on their services to sustain his religious pursuits.[104] Historical records also note that, in his eagerness to perform Daoist rites requiring ambergris incense, for over two decades the emperor repeatedly ordered officials to

[102] Ibid., 9: 114.
[103] James Geiss, "The Chia-Ching Reign, 1522–1566," in *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 465, 479–484. doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521243322.010.
[104] Zhang, *Ming shi*, 7902.

procure it.[105] He reprimanded the many officials who failed to satisfy his demands.[106] As the upright official Hai Rui 海瑞 (1514–1587) famously lamented in a memorial to the throne, "The reign of Jiajing," he remarked, "signifies that every household has been emptied, with no wealth or resources remaining." (*Jiajing zhe, yan jia jia jie jing er wu caiyong ye* 嘉靖者，言家家皆淨而無財用也)[107] His words encapsulated the moral and economic exhaustion brought about by the emperor's unchecked Daoist pursuits.

In the aftermath of the Jiajing emperor's death, his successor, the Longqing Emperor 隆慶帝 (r. 1567–1572), confronted the legacy of his father's religious excesses with suspicion and disapproval. Believing that the elixirs of immortality had contributed to Jiajing's demise, the new emperor sought to curtail Daoist influence at court. He abolished state-sponsored Daoist rites, revoked the honorary titles (*fenghao* 封號) previously granted to the Daoist priests of Mount Longhu, and ordered a comprehensive investigation into their activities. As a result, the priests were dismissed from the Court of Imperial Sacrifices (*Taichang si* 太常寺).[108]

It is within this historical and ideological climate that Luo Maodeng's representation of Daoism in *Sanbao* should be situated. The episode in which the Celestial Masters sect loses its "path to Heaven" and can no longer access the jade seal may be read as Luo's implicit commentary on the moral decline of institutional Daoism. This narrative loss, I argue, serves as an allegory for Luo's conviction that Daoist communities ought to return to their original

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[105] Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo 中央研究院歷史語言研究所[Institute of History and Philology, IHP] ed., *Ming shilu* 明實錄 (Taipei: IHP, 1966), 8395, 9026.

[106] For example, the *Ming History* records that Liang Cai 梁材(1470-1540), Minister of Revenue at the time, was demoted by the Jiajing emperor because Liang did not purchase ambergris for use in the emperor's Daoist rites. The emperor then blamed Liang for this and removed him from his position. Another example is Wang Gao 王杲, who was said to be capable of handling every task, and the Jiajing emperor had a great deal of trust in him. However, later, when the emperor ordered him to buy ambergris, he was unable to obtain any for such a long time he lost the emperor's trust (?). See Zhang, et al., *Ming shi*, 5151, 5329.

[107] Chen Zilong 陳子龍, *Ming jingshi wenbian* 明經世文編 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, 1987), 3256.

[108] IHP., *Ming shilu*, 12. See the 45th year of Jiajing's reign, December.

spiritual vocation—remaining independent and disengaged from secular authority. Through his deliberate reworking of the jade seal legend, Luo advances a broader didactic project: to advocate a conception of Daoism purified of worldly entanglements and to expose the degeneration that accompanied its political co-optation. This interpretive framework is further reinforced by the episode of Mao Ying's two brothers, discussed above, who relinquish their official positions to devote themselves to Daoist cultivation and ultimately attain immortality, thereby exemplifying the ideal of spiritual integrity and withdrawal from political life that Luo seeks to uphold.

The Cycle of Jade and Desire: The Imperial Seal Lost in the Western Seas

In *Sanbao*, Luo Maodeng relocates the legend of the lost imperial seal from the northern desert to the distant "Western Seas," transforming the site of loss from a masculine frontier into an enigmatic, feminized oceanic realm. This narrative transposition operates not merely as a geographical shift but as a symbolic reorientation. The relocation reflects a broader cultural pattern in which the foreign, the maritime, and the unknown are consistently gendered as feminine-constructed in contrast to the masculine associations of the land, the self, and the imperial center. Within the cosmological framework of *yin* and *yang*, the *yin* principle traditionally connotes femininity, desire, or passive dimension of being. [109] Viewed through the enduring male gaze of the late-Ming literati imagination, the foreign world becomes a feminized space: alluring yet dangerous, seductive yet subordinate, an embodiment of the other.

Sanbao reproduces and amplifies this gendered geography by populating its "Western Seas" with formidable female generals who embody both seduction and agency. Among them are Jiang Jinding 姜金定 of the Kingdom of Golden Lotus and Treasure Elephant (*Jinlian Baoxiang guo* 金蓮寶象國), who seeks vengeance for her slain father and brothers; Wang

[109] Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity, and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 31-32.

Xiangu 王仙姑 of the Kingdom of Java (*Zhuawa gu* 爪哇國), who avenges her husband, the Java general Yao Haigan 咬海甘; and Huang Fengxian 黃鳳仙 of the Kingdom of Women, who ultimately allies with the Ming forces and becomes a central figure in the latter half of the narrative. Significantly, in Chapter 37, Eunuch Sanbao explicitly remarks, "It is indeed remarkable that many female generals exist among the Western barbarians" (*Xifan duo you nujiang, yi shi qi shi* 西番多有女將，亦是奇事), acknowledging this perceived inversion of gender norms and situating it within a broader discourse of moral and cultural hierarchy.[110]

Within this context, Luo's decision to relocate the legend of the lost imperial seal to the western seas acquires profound allegorical significance. The transformation represents not only the displacement of a political myth but also the moral reconfiguration of imperial desire. The voyage undertaken in search of the seal—whether motivated by the emperor's pursuit of legitimacy, political authority, or possession of a sacred object—ultimately reveals itself as a journey propelled by "desire" (*yu* 欲), a term that forms a deliberate pun with jade (*yu* 玉). The site, motive, and outcome of this pursuit together construct an allegorical framework in which the emperor's external expedition mirrors his inner compulsion toward desire and attachment.

Intriguingly, this pursuit culminates not in the recovery of the lost seal but in the presentation of another jade object by King Yama, whose accompanying warning marks the termination of the voyage. At the end of the novel, in Chapter 91, yet another "jade" object emerges, further intertwining the motifs of jade, imperial authority, and desire, and bringing the narrative full circle. After the Ming army violently subdues the officials and generals of the Kingdom of Ghosts, King Yama rewards them with a Recumbent Lion Jade Paperweight (*woshi yu zhenzhi* 臥獅玉鎮紙) and presents Jin Bifeng with a poem. As Jin explains, the

[110] Luo, *Sanbao*, 37: 475.

inscription *woshi yu zhenzhi* forms a pun with *wushi yu zhenzhi* (五師御震止), which he interprets as: "You five mighty generals have come before me, wielding forces so great that they shake even the depths of the netherworld—can such violence now be restrained?"[111] The "five generals" invoked here may be read as a reference to the Five Tiger Generals (*Wu hu jiangjun* 五虎將軍), who are violent in the underworld. Through this formulation, King Yama admonishes them to restrain their violence within the underworld and directs their return to Ming China.

The jade paperweight itself, however, bears a morally fraught history. It originally appears in a tale of erotic transgression: a beautiful female revenant, before parting from her human lover after a night of intimacy, gifts him the jade paperweight as a token of affection. When it is later stolen, the scholar suspects his maid of the theft and beats her to death.[112] Thus, this object—initially charged with erotic fantasy and sensual attachment—becomes the catalyst for an act of fatal violence. King Yama repurposes this same jade object as a warning to the Ming army, signaling that their own desires for conquest and domination must come to an end. The imperial fleet ultimately turns back only after receiving this jade paperweight and a satirical poem mocking Jin—both of which, through their intertwined associations with sexual and murderous desire, underscore the cyclical nature of human craving.

The poem that King Yama gives to Jin Bifeng further deepens this symbolic convergence between sexual and violent impulses. According to Jin's explanation, the poem alludes to the story of the eminent Buddhist monk Yutong 玉通 (Pure as Jade), who is seduced by a courtesan sent by a vengeful official. Disguised as a destitute widow, the courtesan appeals to Yutong's compassion, persuading him to offer shelter. When she shivers from the cold, he warms her with his body but fails to restrain his carnal desire. Violating his monastic vows, he

[111] Ibid., 91: 1174.
[112] Ibid., 91: 1178-1180.

succumbs to passion and later takes his own life in remorse.[113] King Yama's poem, by invoking this tale, mockingly equates Yutong's sexual transgression with Jin Bifeng's violent impulses, accusing him of having "aroused the desire to kill" (*Dong le shajie zhi xin* 動了殺戒之心).[114]

Within the novel's symbolic structure, this culminating episode fuses the themes of violence, sexuality, and moral corruption into a single moral allegory. The emperor's maritime voyage, driven by unbridled desire (*yu*)—whether for power, legitimacy, or sensual gratification—ultimately leads to collapse and self-destruction. In contrast to the legend of Qin Shihuang, who subdues the sea with the imperial seal and later reclaims it, the Ming emperor's endeavor ends in futility: the authentic seal remains lost. The substitution of a morally tainted jade from the underworld for the true imperial relic dramatizes both the vanity of desire and the spiritual decay underlying imperial ambition. Through this inversion, Luo transforms the pursuit of the jade seal into a cyclical allegory of desire itself—an unending voyage in which political authority, erotic longing, and the lust for domination dissolve together into the boundless and perilous sea of desire (*yu*).

Luo's narrative design thereby exposes the paradox inherent in the emperor's pursuit. The obsessive search for the imperial jade seal—an emblem of authority, orthodoxy, and moral governance—ultimately reflects humanity's endless immersion in the sea of desire. The vast ocean becomes a metaphor for boundless desire. Symbolically, the imperial seal represents the sphere of the *gong* 公—the public, righteous, and morally legitimate order of governance. Yet, in Luo's moral allegory, the emperor's private desire (*yu*) supplants the communal *gong* order: his quest for the jade becomes a manifestation of desire. In doing so, Luo critiques the emperor's misguided attempt to ground political legitimacy in fetishized material symbols

[113] Ibid., 92: 1180-1189.
[114] Ibid., 92:1181, 1189.

rather than in moral virtue, transforming the imperial voyage into a cautionary allegory of desire's self-consuming nature.

Although the imperial seal signifies the ideal of *gong* order, its pursuit in *Sanbao* is, paradoxically, a voyage propelled by private and self-serving desires (*si* 私). It is during this passage through the oceanic realm that the protagonists gradually lose sight of their original purpose and moral clarity. As the journey unfolds, their suppressed desires surface, revealing the fragility of their virtue. Even Jin Bifeng, the Buddhist monk who has consistently embodied benevolence and adherence to religious precepts, is mocked by King Yama for having "aroused his desire to kill." This moral degeneration extends beyond the fictional sphere, evoking historical recollections of emperors such as Jiajing and Wanli, whose intolerance toward dissent epitomized the triumph of personal will over public principle. In this sense, the "jade lost in the sea" becomes a powerful metaphor for the dissolution of the public and righteous sphere (*gong*) within the boundless sea of private desire (*yu*)—a symbolic representation of how rulers and subjects alike may lose themselves in the depths of their own desires.

Sanbao rewrites the legend of the imperial seal—traditionally recorded in official history as being lost in the northern desert—by relocating its disappearance to the western seas. As a symbol of dynastic legitimacy and imperial succession, the seal's loss in the ocean signifies not only the disintegration of political authority but also the symbolic submergence of moral order within a boundless "sea of desire." At the same time, the pursuit of the imperial seal may seem to be interpreted as an allegorical quest for Confucian orthodoxy and moral rectitude. Yet, paradoxically, *Sanbao* constructs a world conspicuously devoid of imperial examinations, Confucian scholars, and literati—figures that traditionally embodied the moral and intellectual backbone of the empire. Their absence, seemingly deliberate, renders the vast maritime world one in which Confucian order has been suspended or erased.

As Chiung-yun Evelyn Liu observes, *Sanbao* reconsiders early Sino-foreign relations and the dynamics of cross-cultural encounters during the initial stages of global contact.[115] In light of Liu's argument, the protagonists' gradual loss of self-control and the conspicuous erasure of Confucian scholar-officials can be read as the author's implicit commentary on the cultural decentering of China following its oceanic expansion. The voyage thus becomes an allegory for the erosion of the traditional Sinocentric worldview—a representation of a civilization adrift in moral and ideological uncertainty. I therefore argue that Luo Maodeng's depiction of a parallel maritime world signals both a literary and historical consciousness of dislocation: a recognition that his own late-Ming society existed beyond the boundaries of the Confucian moral framework, suspended within a state of profound spiritual and ethical decay.

Additionally, as discussed earlier, Luo appears to have deliberately crafted the episode in which the imperial seal is lost in the ocean, drawing upon the ocean's symbolic associations with femininity and desire—all qualities traditionally linked to the *yin* principle. Within the cosmological framework of *yin* and *yang*, *yin* often connotes moral ambiguity, weakness, or indecency, and is frequently positioned as inferior to the active and virtuous *yang*. By situating the loss of the imperial seal within this feminized and morally ambivalent realm, Luo not only imbues the episode with symbolic resonance but also critiques the instability of the moral and political order it represents.

Given the imperial seal's significance as an emblem of legitimate authority, I further suggest that Luo may also have intended this narrative design to reflect the fifteen-year political controversy over the succession of the crown prince during the Wanli Emperor's reign (1572–1620)—a dispute rooted in the emperor's inability to restrain his personal desire and favoritism toward Consort Zheng 鄭貴妃 (ca. 1565–1630). This historical episode, later known as the Imperial Succession Dispute (國本之爭), destabilized the Ming court and revealed the

[115] Liu, "Knowledge, Emotion, and Imagination," 115-148.

corrosive effects of private passion on public governance. In this light, the protagonists' futile pursuit of *yu*—a pun encompassing both jade and desire—in *Sanbao* mirrors the broader moral condition of late-Ming society, in which both emperor and commoners alike are ensnared by their own unchecked desires.

2.3 Forging and Punishing the Jade Seal: Political Allegory and Dynastic Legitimacy under the Wanli Emperor

Following the fictional detail that the imperial seal was divided into three parts, *Sanbao* introduces a plot in which the Yongle Emperor attempts to replace the original Qin imperial seal with the remaining two fragments of He's jade. This section thus examines how Luo Maodeng deliberately constructs this episode—the Yongle Emperor's effort to forge a "false jade seal" from the residual pieces of He's jade—as a veiled political critique of the Imperial Succession Dispute that unfolded during the reign of the Wanli Emperor. As discussed previously, Luo explicitly traces the genealogy of the imperial seal, noting that the central fragment of He's jade was originally transformed into the imperial seal itself, while the two remaining pieces were fashioned into Daoist seals—one for Celestial Master Zhang of Mount Longhu and another for the Maoshan sect. Later in the narrative, Luo devotes considerable attention to describing how the Yongle Emperor commands craftsmen to repolish and re-carve this "false jade seal." Three separate rounds of effort are undertaken to erase the existing inscription and replace it with the phrase Treasure Mandated by Heaven (*fengtian chengyun zhi bao* 奉天承運之寶), an inscription traditionally associated with imperial orthodoxy and divine sanction.[116] Through this act of re-inscription, the emperor seeks to transform the counterfeit object into a new imperial seal that would legitimize his reign.

[116] Luo, *Sanbao*, 9: 111.

Yet the jade refuses to yield. Despite repeated polishing and re-engraving, the inscription persistently reverts to its original form, resisting human intervention. Infuriated by this defiance, the Yongle Emperor punishes the obstinate seal, enacting a symbolic drama of frustrated authority. I suggest that Luo's design of this episode functions as a pointed allegory: the jade's refusal to submit embodies the moral and metaphysical resistance of authenticity against falsification. In this reading, the episode underscores the limitations of imperial power and the futility of manipulating sacred symbols of legitimacy to fulfill personal ambition or dynastic desire.

> An imperial edict was immediately issued, summoning the Chief Commander of the Embroidered-Uniform Guard who was responsible for the custody of the seal, to appear outside the Meridian Gate. He was ordered to escort the jade seal and to carry out its punishment—forty strikes with imperial rods—after which the seal was declared permanently unfit for use. Upon receiving the decree, the Chief Commander commanded the guards to replace the rod after every five blows. A total of forty strikes required eight sergeants in succession, and the jade seal was said to have been "beaten to the underworld, never to be used again." Why, one might ask, would a seal be described as "beaten to the underworld and never to be used again?" It turned out that this jade seal was no ordinary object but a living entity: each night it consumed four ounces of cinnabar and possessed the power to stamp a thousand sheets of paper. After enduring forty blows from the imperial rods, however, it ceased to consume cinnabar, and each stamp henceforth produced only a single sheet. Does it not, then, qualify as "beaten to the underworld and never to be used again?" 即時傳出一道旨意，宣上錦衣衛掌印的堂官，到於午門之外，押將玉印，重責四十御棍，永不敘用。錦衣衛都指揮領了聖旨，喝令校尉五棍一換，四十御棍，換了八個校尉，把個玉璽打得一命歸泉，不中重用。怎麼一個璽叫做一命歸泉，不中重用？原來這塊玉璽是個活的，夜食四兩硃砂，一印千張紙。自從打了四十御棍之後，不食硃砂，一印只是一張紙，卻不是個一命歸泉，不中重用？[117]

[117] Ibid., 10: 124.

An especially intriguing episode in the novel describes how "this jade seal is a living entity," yet after being beaten forty times, it ceases to consume cinnabar and ultimately "dies." Luo's use of anthropomorphic narration here invites readers to question whether the object being punished is truly a jade seal or, symbolically, a human being. This blurring of the boundary between object and person may further allude to the Jiajing Emperor's obsession with Daoist practices, particularly when one considers the deliberate coincidences of numerology and alchemical symbolism embedded in the episode.

The detail of "forty" imperial strikes and the seal's dependence on cinnabar evoke the Daoist pursuit of immortality and the emperor's notorious preoccupation with elixirs. This narrative coincidence may thus serve as an oblique commentary on the moral and political corruption produced by such esoteric indulgences. Historically, following the official Hai Rui's outspoken criticism of the Jiajing Emperor, Hai was imprisoned. He Yishang 何以尚 (1526–1597), the official who petitioned for Hai Rui's release and claimed to have purchased "forty" ounces of the rare spice ambergris as an offering for the emperor's Daoist rituals, was likewise punished and incarcerated.[118]

The reference to "forty" ounces of of precious ambergris offered for Daoist practice resonates with the recurring use of the number *si* 四 (four) and its multiple *sishi* 四十 (forty) throughout *Sanbao*. This numerical motif functions not only as a pun on *si* 死 (death) and *sishi* 死士 (men who are willing to die for their masters or ideals), but also aligns with the novel's symbolic numerology. In the text, the "living jade seal" consumes "four ounces of cinnabar each night" and is later punished by being beaten "forty" times with imperial rods—an intertextual parallel that reinforces the fatalistic and moral dimensions of the number.

[118] IHP, *Ming Shilu,* 9026.

Furthermore, the repeated phrase "to die and return to the springs" (*yi ming gui quan* 一命歸泉) may serve as a phonetic pun on "to admonish someone with one's life" (*yi ming gui quan* 一命規勸).[119] Within this context, the expression acquires a double valence: it signifies both literal death and moral exhortation. Luo's wordplay thus transforms numerical and phonetic repetition into an ethical commentary—suggesting that moral counsel and sacrifice are intertwined, and that the cost of truth or integrity in a corrupt age may indeed be one's very life.

There is, however, another possible interpretation of the phrase *bu zhong chong yong* (不中重用) used to describe the jade. Rather than meaning "unfit for reuse," it may also be understood as "cannot be relied upon." Furthermore, the expression *bu zhong yong* (不中用) may also form a deliberate pun on *bu zhong yong* (不中庸), or "not following the Doctrine of the Mean." The *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸) is a Confucian classic originally derived from the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) and later established as one of the *Four Books* (*Sishu* 四書) by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200). It articulates the Confucian ideal of moderation and equilibrium, principles that guide self-cultivation, learning, and the moral conduct of the gentleman (*junzi* 君子).

This linguistic and philosophical resonance finds a parallel in the scene where Celestial Master Zhang instructs the Yongle Emperor on the proper principles of rulership. Through Zhang's words, Luo conveys the Confucian vision of "the learning of emperors and kings" (*diwang zhi xue* 帝王之學), which emphasizes "cultivating the self, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world" (*xiushen qijia zhiguo ping tianxia* 修身齊家治國平天下), derived from the *The Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學). The episode thus

[119] Luo, *Sanbao*, 10: 124.

functions as both an admonition and a reflection on imperial education and moral governance. When the Yongle Emperor boastfully claims to possess vast erudition despite his ignorance of the imperial seal's history, Celestial Master Zhang tactfully offers an excuse for his lack of knowledge, stating:

> The learning of emperors and kings concerns only the great Way—the cultivation of the self, the regulation of the family, the governance of the state, and the bringing of harmony to the realm. How could the principles governing order and disorder, prosperity and decline, from antiquity to the present, possibly be equated with the pedantic pursuits of commoner scholars—those men in coarse garments and humble dwellings who obsess over the minutiae of words and phrases, quibbling over rhetoric and competing in hollow displays of erudition? It is precisely for this reason, Your Majesty, that you have never laid eyes upon this imperial seal! 帝王之學，只講一個修身齊家治國平天下的大道理，與夫古今治亂興衰之所以然，豈肯下同於布衣寒士，尋朱數墨，逐字逐句，鬥靡誇多？故此陛下不曾看見這個傳國寶哩！[120]

Although Celestial Master Zhang cleverly provides an explanation for the emperor—who boasts of having read all the classics yet admits never having seen or heard of the imperial seal—the episode simultaneously exposes the emperor's ignorance of the very principles underlying "the learning of emperors and kings." This Confucian doctrine, as Zhang articulates, emphasizes "cultivating the self, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world." The emperor's ignorance regarding the seal thus becomes a subtle allegory for his moral blindness: his failure to comprehend the true foundation of imperial learning and virtue.

This motif of failed self-cultivation finds a revealing parallel in other late-Ming works that interrogate the moral limits of Confucian ideals. For instance, *Jin Ping Mei* offers a satirical reworking of the *Daxue*, portraying the moral disintegration of Ximen Qing as a

[120] Ibid., 9: 110; Here I adopted part of Gregory's translation. Also see Gregory, "Daydreaming Dynasty," 17.

systematic inversion of the Confucian model of self-cultivation. His inability to discipline himself on the personal level radiates outward—from the corruption of his household to the collapse of the larger social and political order—transforming the Confucian microcosm of moral governance into a scathing critique of spiritual decay.[121] In both *Jin Ping Mei* and *Sanbao*, the Confucian ethic of self-cultivation serves as a structural framework through which moral failure is dramatized and magnified.

Within this broader intellectual context, Luo Maodeng's depiction of the Yongle Emperor's futile attempt to replace the authentic imperial seal with a counterfeit jade one invites readers to reflect on the emperor's own moral inadequacy within a similar microcosmic framework. The emperor's ignorance of the seal thus mirrors his ignorance of the Confucian principle of the "learning of emperors and kings." Therefore, I suggest that, by aligning this fictional representation with the historical example of the Wanli Emperor, Luo extends his critique from the realm of allegory to that of political commentary.

Indeed, during the Wanli period, a fifteen-year political crisis known as the Imperial Succession Dispute unfolded, exemplifying precisely the kind of moral disarray that Luo allegorically condemns. The conflict arose because Empress Wang (1564–1620) was childless, while the less favored Consort Lady Wang (1565–1611) bore the emperor's eldest son, Zhu Changluo 朱常洛 (1582–1620), in the tenth year of the Wanli reign (1582). Despite Zhu's legitimate status as the firstborn, the Wanli Emperor's favoritism toward Consort Zheng led him to seek the appointment of her son—the third prince—as heir apparent. While the majority of officials urged him to follow dynastic precedent and name his eldest son successor, the emperor's obstinacy deepened the rift between ruler and court. After Consort Zheng gave birth to the third prince in the fourteenth year of Wanli's reign (1586), repeated petitions from ministers were rejected, and the dispute dragged on for more than a decade, a

[121] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks*, 158-162.

period marked by the emperor's increasing withdrawal from governance and his failure to uphold the moral and political responsibilities intrinsic to Confucian rulership. [122]

The emperor's obstinacy came at a high moral and political cost. Many officials were consequently punished, demoted, or subjected to corporeal punishment with the "court rods" (*ting zhang* 廷杖)—a punitive image that symbolically recalls the fate of the "jade seal," which, for insisting on its own integrity, was beaten "forty times with imperial rods unto death."[123] In *Sanbao*, Luo Maodeng weaves Confucian moral philosophy into his allegorical narrative, embedding within it the principle that a virtuous ruler must uphold both moral and social order. Through the admonishing voice of Celestial Master Zhang, Luo invokes "the learning of emperors and kings" as a subtle critique of the Wanli Emperor's failure to embody the foundational Confucian virtues of self-cultivation, familial regulation, and righteous governance. The Wanli Emperor's inability to restrain his personal desires and his indulgence in self-gratification led to partiality within the imperial household, which, in turn, distorted his political judgment and undermined dynastic order. His neglect of the principle of "cultivating the self and regulating the family" thus precluded the realization of the higher ideal of "governing the state and bringing peace to the world." In this way, Luo's allegory of moral failure within *Sanbao* finds striking historical resonance in the ethical decay of late-Ming political life.

This connection becomes even more evident in the historical episode involving Wang Xijue 王錫爵 (1534–1611), the Senior Grand Secretary who attempted to mediate the succession crisis. In 1593, the Wanli Emperor informed Wang of his intention to confer princely titles upon his eldest, third, and fifth sons, and to determine the heir apparent thereafter based on merit rather than birthright. Confronted with this delicate situation, Wang

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[122] Ray Huang, "The Lung-Ch'ing and Wan-Li Reigns, 1567–1620," in *The Cambridge History of China*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 515. doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521243322.011.
[123] *Ming shi*, 6075, 6133. See the biographies of Li Xianke 李獻可 (?-?) and Wang Dewan 王德完 (1554-1621).

found himself torn between loyalty to the emperor and the moral expectations of his fellow officials. Seeking to balance both, he proposed that the eldest prince formally recognize the empress as his mother, thereby legitimizing his status as heir and preserving the Confucian principle of primogeniture in imperial succession. At the same time, Wang expressed his willingness to officiate the ceremony should the emperor approve.

However, his proposal was rejected by both the emperor and his colleagues. As a result, the imperial appointment was rescinded, and Wang's actions were misconstrued by members of the court as an attempt at political favoritism or bribery. The emperor subsequently granted princely titles to all three sons simultaneously—a subtle maneuver that effectively undermined the seniority of the first-born. The decision provoked widespread concern and criticism among the scholar-officials, who perceived it as a violation of dynastic and moral order. Under mounting pressure from public opinion and facing hostility from his peers, Wang submitted a memorial of self-criticism and ultimately resigned from office, leading to the dissolution of his political faction.[124] This episode—marked by moral compromise, bureaucratic paralysis, and imperial obstinacy—embodies the very ethical disintegration that Luo dramatizes allegorically through the fable of the jade seal.

The connection between fiction and history becomes even clearer when examined through the symbolism of the divided jade in *Sanbao*. The novel's detail that He's jade was divided into three parts—later fashioned into one imperial seal and two Daoist seals—appears to parallel the political circumstances of the Imperial Succession Dispute. The three seals, originating from the same piece of jade, may symbolically allude to the three princes of the Wanli court, each sharing the same royal bloodline. The "false jade seal," which the emperor seeks to use in place of the authentic imperial seal, is explicitly described as being carved from the left fragment of He's jade. The character *pang* 旁, meaning "side" or "periphery,"

[124] Huang, *The Cambridge History of China*, 538-539. Also see the biography of Wang Xijue in *Ming shi*, 5752.

carries the additional connotation of being "secondary" or "subordinate." In this light, the parallel between the "counterfeit" seal—crafted from a marginal, non-central portion of the sacred jade—and the Wanli Emperor's preference for a secondary son neither firstborn nor born to the empress (*shuzi* 庶子), appears deliberate. The symbolism reinforces Luo Maodeng's political critique: the emperor's moral blindness leads him to favor what is secondary, peripheral, and illegitimate, both in the realm of artifacts and of lineage.

Furthermore, this allegorical association would have evoked for Ming readers the broader pattern of dynastic irregularities and the political turmoil caused by the repeated examples of contested successions that complicated the legitimacy of the Ming imperial line. The Yongle Emperor himself, though a historical exemplar of powerful rule and imperial expansion, had usurped the throne from his nephew despite not being the rightful heir to the imperial line. Similarly, the Great Rites Controversy (*daliyi zhi zheng* 大禮議之爭) of the Jiajing reign, which arose from ritual disputes following the emperor's posthumous adoption by his predecessor, reflected another instance in which questions of legitimacy, ritual propriety, and filial piety destabilized the imperial order. By embedding these echoes of historical succession crises within the narrative of *Sanbao*, Luo Maodeng transforms the story of the divided jade into a multilayered allegory of dynastic instability, moral deviation, and the enduring tension between authenticity and substitution in both political and ethical realms.[125]

Within this allegorical framework, Luo further deepens his critique by exploring the psychological and moral implications of imperial command. In *Sanbao*, the officials' reaction to the repeated polishing and re-engraving of the jade seal may also be read as an allegorical reflection of bureaucratic anxiety during the Wanli court's succession dispute. The craftsmen's unease mirrors the officials' struggle to uphold orthodox norms of legitimacy while simultaneously avoiding imperial displeasure. Luo Maodeng portrays the official Ma,

[125] Geiss, "The Chia-Ching Reign, 1522–1566," 443-450.

who oversees the remaking of the jade seal, as muttering to himself, “If this seal can be polished and washed well, there will be a day to return home gloriously. However, if it cannot be polished and washed, I have no idea what to do.” (這個璽若是磨洗得工成，還有衣錦還鄉的日子；若是磨洗不成，卻不知怎麼是好哩!)[126] Similarly, the craftsmen privately reflect, “If polishing and washing this seal brings success, there will be rewards of mutton, wine, and flowers; but if any mistake occurs, who knows what kind of misfortune will come.” (磨洗這個璽，若有功果，羊酒花紅；若有疏虞，禍來不測)[127]

These parallel sentiments vividly encapsulate the precarious position of court officials caught between moral conviction and imperial will. The act of “polishing and washing the seal” thus becomes a metaphor for bureaucratic complicity in the emperor’s effort to replace the authentic imperial seal—an implicit analogue for the attempt to substitute the legitimate heir. Success in this endeavor promises honor and reward, while failure portends ruin. Luo’s portrayal of these ambivalent figures underscores the pervasive atmosphere of fear, opportunism, and moral compromise within the late-Ming bureaucracy, revealing how the emperor’s private desires and political manipulations corroded not only dynastic legitimacy but also the ethical integrity of those who served him.

This allegory reaches a more tragic dimension when the first attempt to re-engrave the seal fails. Following this failure, Minister Ma is consumed by fear of imperial retribution and the prospect of demotion—an anxiety reminiscent of the officials punished for their involvement in the Imperial Succession Dispute. Luo depicts Ma’s despair in poignant terms: “Minister Ma, holding this jade seal, returned to his office, sorrowful and weeping. He thought to himself, ‘I have wasted ten years of study by the light of fireflies in vain; though I hold a second-rank position, today I am ruined because of this seal.’” (馬尚書領著這顆玉

[126] Luo, *Sanbao*, 10: 121.
[127] Ibid., 10: 121.

璽，轉到本衙，悲悲切切，兩淚雙拋，心裡想道：「空負了我十載螢窗之苦，官居二品之尊，今日斷送在這個璽上。」)[128] By juxtaposing Minister Ma's personal downfall with the fate of officials persecuted in the succession dispute, I argue that Luo establishes a clear correspondence between the fictional and historical realms. Both in the novel and in history, diligent officials—whose success through the civil examinations epitomized Confucian ideals of merit and service—find their careers destroyed by imperial caprice. Their downfall becomes emblematic of the moral collapse of the Ming court itself.

Taken together, these interlinked episodes demonstrate how *Sanbao* operates as a sophisticated political allegory under the guise of historical fiction. Through the intertwined symbolism of the divided jade and the motif of punished officials, Luo Maodeng transforms historical grievance into moral reflection. Beneath the ostensible praise of the Great Ming dynasty lies a veiled critique of contemporary politics, in which Luo exposes the moral and institutional decay corroding the imperial court from within. His allegory reveals how the Wanli Emperor's failure to uphold the ethical imperatives of rulership—his neglect of self-cultivation, familial order, and righteous governance—resulted in administrative paralysis and pervasive corruption. The protagonists' futile quest for the lost imperial seal, the emblem of dynastic legitimacy, becomes an extended metaphor for this broader moral and political failure. Ultimately, the unattained seal stands as both a symbol of forfeited authority and a moral indictment of a ruler whose unchecked desires and ethical blindness undermined the very foundations of the state.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how Luo Maodeng integrates political consciousness into his novelistic imagination. I argue that he deliberately draws upon the *Zizhi tongjian* to position

[128] Ibid., 10: 122.

his work as a parallel “mirror” of political and moral reflection for the contemporary emperor. By appropriating historical narratives and reconfiguring them within a fictional framework, Luo transforms *Sanbao* into a didactic text that simultaneously entertains and instructs, using allegory to critique moral decay and political corruption.

Building upon earlier historical accounts of the imperial seal, Luo introduces two crucial innovations: first, He’s jade is divided into three fragments, and second, the lost seal is relocated from the northern desert to the western seas. The first alteration serves as a veiled critique of Daoist institutions and their entanglement with imperial authority. Luo’s portrayal of the followers of Celestial Master Zhang—who have lost their direct route to Heaven and access to the sacred jade seal—may allude to the Jiajing Emperor’s notorious obsession with Daoist alchemy and its political consequences. The second modification, shifting the site of the seal’s loss from land to sea, associated with yin, desire, and the feminine, transforms the maritime voyage into an allegorical space through which Luo explores the destructive nature of imperial passions—particularly those tied to power, lust, and violence.

In this light, the long-standing Imperial Succession Dispute during the Wanli reign can be understood as one of the historical parallels underlying Luo's fictional allegory. The Wanli Emperor’s failure to restrain his personal desires and his obsession with Consort Zheng led to protracted political paralysis and moral decay at the heart of the court. Likewise, the Yongle Emperor’s attempt in the novel to “wash” and re-engrave the Maoshan Daoist seal may be read as an allegorical reconstruction of events from Luo’s own time—a symbolic reenactment of the emperor’s futile effort to manipulate legitimacy through personal will rather than moral virtue.

Ultimately, by reimagining the imperial seal narrative, Luo Maodeng assumes an implicit advisory role consistent with the Confucian ideal of the scholar-official: to admonish rulers and restore moral order through writing. Like *Zizhi tongjian*, *Sanbao* serves as a

political mirror and moral guide, offering lessons on governance, virtue, and the dangers of unrestrained desire. Through his creative adaptation of the imperial seal legend, Luo transforms late-Ming historical anxiety into allegory, using fiction as a vehicle for political critique and as a means to fulfill the Confucian responsibility of guiding the ruler toward the righteous principles of governance.

CHAPTER III

THE DUALITY OF SILVER VISION: MONETARY VALUE AND POLITICAL PERCEPTION IN THE KINGDOM OF SILVER EYES

This chapter examines the portrayal of the "Colored-Eyes Kingdoms" in *Sanbao*, with particular attention to the Kingdom of Golden Eyes (*Jinyan guo* 金眼國) and the Kingdom of Silver Eyes (*Yinyan guo* 銀眼國). It argues that these imagined polities function as sites where competing visions of the world are staged and negotiated. Specifically, the chapter examines the interaction between two interrelated systems of value: on the one hand, the expansion of global trade and the commodification of material culture of commodification; on the other, the Sinocentric tribute system and Confucian moral ideology. While the novel aligns with a literati worldview grounded in a Sino-centric moral and political order, it simultaneously registers an ambivalent awareness of shifting values and perceptual modes produced by the silver-based economy and the intensification of domestic and transoceanic trade in the late-Ming.

Within this framework, the chapter develops the analytical significance of ocular motifs on two levels. First, the representation of eyes and pupils—as well as acts of eye-sacrifice—functions as a symbolic device through which these tensions are made visible. Second, the broader concept of "vision" refers to the processes through which the world is perceived, interpreted, and evaluated. These "colored eyes" not only project cultural otherness across distant seas and extend the Ming dynasty's self-representation within a hierarchical global imaginary, but also reveal underlying anxieties about the moral and perceptual consequences of expanding commercial activity. The eye thus emerges as a privileged site where competing

frameworks of value—Confucian political morality and emergent commercial rationality—intersect in unstable and contested ways.

The historical backdrop of this narrative tension coincides with the period commonly described as Europe's Age of Exploration, during which vast quantities of silver from the New World and Japan entered China through increasingly complex global trade networks. Despite China's historical scarcity of silver, the late-Ming witnessed a transformative shift as silver became both the standardized medium of monetary exchange and a compulsory form of taxation. Scholarly research has shown that between the Hongwu (1368–1399) and Zhengde (1506–1521) reigns—a span of approximately 130 years—the Ming state collected an annual average of roughly 100,000 taels of silver in taxes as a result of this foreign influx.[129] This steady circulation of silver profoundly reshaped late-Ming society, fostering a dynamic consumer culture marked by expanding markets, unprecedented economic growth, and heightened social mobility.

As the economic effects of this transformation extended beyond fiscal administration, expanding markets stimulated the production and circulation of both local and imported commodities, broadening access to luxury goods and foreign artifacts previously confined to elite circles. These developments also fostered a vibrant print culture, providing new opportunities for writers and publishers to engage with the social and moral consequences of commercial expansion.[130] As discussed in the Introduction, scholars such as Ning Ma have linked these transformations to literary forms attentive to material exchange and global circulation.[131] The Golden- and Silver-Eye kingdoms offer a particularly revealing example of this phenomenon, reflecting an acute awareness of a world increasingly structured by the movement of precious metals and commodities.

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[129] Jin Xu, *Empire of Silver: A New Monetary History of China*. Translated by Stacy Mosher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 11.
[130] Wu, *Pinwei shehua*, 40-45.
[131] Ma, *The Age of Silver*, 6.

Building on this insight, this chapter argues that the novel deploys ocular motifs—including pupils, vision, and acts of eye-sacrifice—to articulate a literati commitment to a Sino-centric order while simultaneously registering unease about the transformations brought by silver, commerce, and global exchange. The narrative's fascination with foreign bodies and distant lands thus carries a productive irony: even as it seeks to reaffirm moral hierarchy, it reveals the instability of those very frameworks. In this sense, the Golden- and Silver-Eye kingdoms crystallize a late-Ming moment of value tension, in which inherited visions of the world are strained—but not entirely displaced—by the forces of global circulation.

3.1 Seeing Value Through Colored Eyes: Encyclopedic Writing, Silver Pupils, and the Perception of Value

[Selected items from the Java Kingdom's Tribute List]: Two chests of jade-marrow incense, four red parrots, four white parrots, ten jars of wine produced from the sugar palm tree. (Sugar palm, the name of a tree, from which wine is produced) 玉髓香二箱, 紅鸚鵡四架, 白鸚鵡四架, 桄榔酒十罈(桄榔，樹名，其中出酒).[132]

As Liu Chiung-yun has observed, among the approximately thirty-nine kingdoms depicted in *Sanbao*, about thirty-five can be traced to historical records. The remaining four—the Kingdom of Women, the Kingdom of Safa, the Kingdom of Silver Eyes, and the Kingdom of Golden Eyes—are primarily fictional constructions.[133] Significantly, two of these four imaginary kingdoms are defined by peoples with "metallic eyes," a pattern that suggests a deliberate narrative arrangement rather than random invention. The clustering of these fictional polities around precious metals points to the novelist's heightened sensitivity to the symbolic and economic value of metals in the late-Ming world. Focusing on the Kingdom of Silver Eyes as portrayed in Chapter 80, this section examines how "silver eyes" function simultaneously as a marker of foreignness and as a symbolic condensation of

[132] Luo, *Sanbao*, 45: 580.
[133] Liu, "When Fantastic Narrative," 61.

monetary value, revealing an emergent economic consciousness embedded within the novel's imaginative geography.

To elucidate the narrative logic behind this construction, this section begins not with *Sanbao* itself, but with a page from a late-Ming encyclopedia for daily-use (See Figure 3.1). This choice is deliberate. Encyclopedic writing offers a crucial visual and systematic framework of knowledge through which late-Ming readers encountered foreign lands, bodies, and material resources.[134] Far from functioning merely as repositories of information, such encyclopedias organized the world through systems of visual display, classification, and comparison, shaping how difference, distance, and value were perceived and rendered intelligible.

The page below, drawn from a late-Ming daily-use encyclopedia, is organized into two vertically layered registers that articulate distinct yet interrelated modes of knowing the world. The lower register presents illustrated depictions of fictional or semi-legendary foreign peoples and polities, drawing in part—but not exclusively—on materials associated with *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhai jing* 山海經). These include figures such as the Kingdom of Immortality (*Busi guo* 不死國), the Kingdom of Chest-Pierced People (*Chuanxiong Guo* 穿胸國), and the Five-Stream Barbarians (*Wuxi man* 五溪蠻), all of which circulated widely in late-imperial daily-use encyclopedias and popular illustrated compendia. Rather than reproducing a single classical source, this register assembles a composite repertoire of marvels that foregrounds bodily difference, visual strangeness, and supernatural abilities. The emphasis lies on imaginative descriptions derived from earlier

[134] Chen Yunzhong 陳允中, ed. *Xinke qunshu zhaiyao shimin bianyong yishibuqiuren* 新刻群書摘要士民便用一事不求人[*Newly Printed Extracts from Various Books for the Convenient Use of Scholars and Commoners—Handling All Matters Without Asking Others*] , In *Mingdai tongsu riyong leishu jikan* 明代通俗日用類書集刊, vol. 8, edited by Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan lishi yanjiusuo wenhuashi 中國社會科學院歷史研究所文化室 (Chongqing: Xinan shifan daxue chubanshe, 2011), 496.

textual traditions, rendered legible through exaggerated physical traits and striking visual forms.

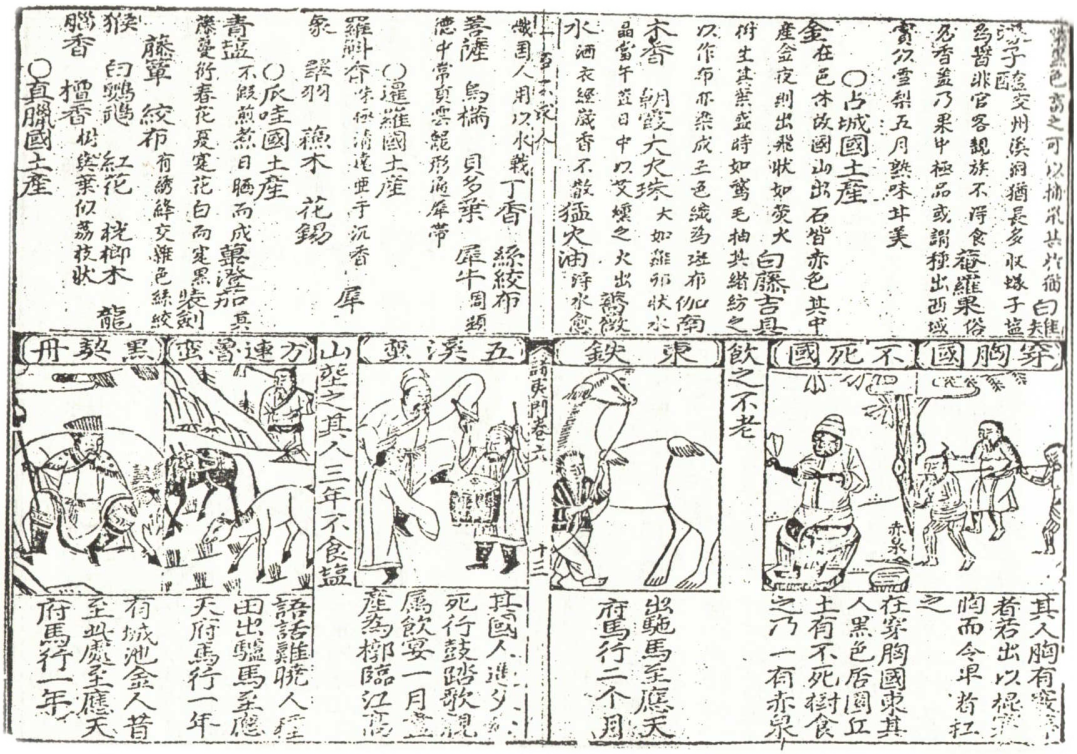


Figure 3.1: In *Newly Printed Extracts from Various Books for the Convenient Use of Scholars and Commoners—Handling All Matters Without Asking Others*, 496.

By contrast, the upper register describes historically attested foreign polities—such as the Kingdom of Java, Champa, Siam (present-day Thailand), and Chenla (an early kingdom in present-day Cambodia)—drawing on historical records and modes of empirical observation. Each entry is accompanied by lists of local products and brief descriptions of regional specialties, foregrounding material resources and commodities as key markers of regional identity. This upper layer reflects an observational epistemology grounded in commerce, tribute, and geographical specificity. The juxtaposition of these two registers thus stages a late-Ming epistemic hierarchy within a single visual field: imaginative, bodily-centered marvels below, and empirically described, commodity-oriented foreign lands above.

Scholars have long questioned why, despite the accumulation of increasingly detailed knowledge about foreign lands during the Yuan and Ming periods, visual representations of those regions in encyclopedic works continued to rely so heavily on much earlier classical speculation. Hsu Hui-ling challenges the assumption that such works merely juxtapose empirical information with fantastical elements in an unsystematic or residual manner. Instead, Hsu argues that late-Ming daily-use encyclopedias deliberately foreground the coexistence of heterogeneous materials as part of a coherent epistemic framework.[135]

As Hsu demonstrates, these encyclopedias consistently place historically attested polities alongside entities derived from *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* within sections labeled "Barbarians" (*zhu yi* 諸夷). This organizational logic collapses distinctions between the empirical and the speculative, allowing geographical knowledge from different historical moments to coexist within a single classificatory space. What matters, in this framework, is not whether a given kingdom still existed, but how it functioned within an inherited structure of world knowledge capable of accommodating multiple temporalities at once.[136] Seen from this perspective, the juxtaposition of fantasy and fact should not be understood as a failure of discrimination or accuracy. Rather, it constitutes a mode of exposition that renders disparate forms of knowledge commensurable. Fictional creatures and verifiable foreign polities are

[135] Hsu Hui-lin 許暉林, "Imagined Imperial Tribute: Descriptions of Foreign Lands in the 'Barbarians' Sections of Late-Ming Dynasty Daily-use Encyclopedias," translated by Michael Day, *Lingua Franca*, Issue 6 (2020): 17-18. https://sharpweb.org/linguafranca/2020-hsu/ Originally published as "Chaogong de xiangxiang：Wan Ming riyong leishu zhuyi men de yiyu lun shu" 朝貢的想像：晚明日用類書諸夷門的異域論述, *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu tongxun* 中國文哲研究通訊, 20.2 (2010.6): 169-192. Also see Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, "*Shanhai jing*, *Zhigong tu* he lüxingji zhong de yiyu jiyi—Limadoi laihua qianhou Zhongguoren guanyu yiyu de zhishi ziyuan ji qi bianhua" 《山海經》、《職貢圖》和旅行記中的異域記憶—利瑪竇來華前後中國人關於異域的知識資源及其變化 [Memories of Foreign Lands in the Classic of Mountains and Seas, Portraits of Tributary Peoples, and Travel Accounts: Chinese Sources of Knowledge about Foreign Lands and Their Transformation before and after Matteo Ricci's Arrival in China] (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan zhongguo wenzhe yanjiusuo 中央研究院中國文哲研究所 [Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy], 2004), 350.

[136] Ibid., 17-18.

integrated into a shared visual and classificatory system that privileges relational positioning over historical precision.

This understanding aligns with Shang Wei's analysis of late-imperial daily-use encyclopedias. Rather than treating these texts as transparent records of everyday life, Shang emphasizes their normative and pedagogical functions. Through repeated reprinting, revision, and supplementation, encyclopedias did not merely transmit information; they actively shaped readers' habits of perception, instructing them how to see, categorize, and evaluate the world.[137] Their authority thus derived less from factual accuracy than from their capacity to stabilize inherited frameworks of perception in the face of an expanding and increasingly complex global horizon.

Read through Shang's perspective, the two-layered register functions not simply as a repository of heterogeneous knowledge, but as a practical epistemic device. It trained readers to navigate between wonder and verification, bodily strangeness and material specificity, fantasy and empiricism, without insisting on rigid distinctions between them. In doing so, daily-use encyclopedias disciplined habits of perception that integrated visual curiosity with classificatory order, preparing readers to apprehend foreign lands, bodies, and commodities within a shared framework of knowledge, value, and usefulness.

It is this encyclopedic logic of seeing and ordering the world that *Sanbao* both inherits and transforms. Although the novel's narrative form differs from that of encyclopedic entries, its depictions of foreign kingdoms—particularly its attention to bodily features, visual distinctiveness, and local products—echo the classificatory impulse and visual rhetoric of late-Ming encyclopedic writing. The adoption of an accessible, quasi-encyclopedic style allows the novelist to render distant lands comprehensible to a broad readership while simultaneously staging foreignness through visible, material signs.

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[137] Shang, "The Making of the Everyday World, 63-92.

This visual and epistemic strategy must be situated within the broader context of global trade. Following Spain's commissioning of Christopher Columbus in the late fifteenth century, vast natural resources—especially silver—were extracted from the Americas and integrated into expanding global trade networks. Between 1550 and 1800, silver from regions such as Peru and Mexico accounted for more than 80 percent of global silver production.[138] Drawing on the work of Fernand Braudel, scholars have offered differing estimates of the proportion of American silver that ultimately entered China. Jacques Gernet suggests that between 1527 and 1821 at least half of this silver flowed into China, whereas Pierre Chaunu proposes a more conservative figure of approximately one-third.[139] Despite their differences, both estimates underscore the unprecedented scale of silver inflow during this period. This influx not only transformed fiscal policy and commercial practice but also reshaped habits of thought, perception, and value in late-Ming society.

It is against this historical and epistemic backdrop that the Kingdom of Silver Eyes in *Sanbao* should be read. In Chapter 80, when the Ming fleet arrives at this kingdom, Eunuch Sanbao engages in a discussion with his scouts concerning the origin of its name. Upon asking why the country is called the "Kingdom of Silver Eyes," he is told that its people possess no black pupils; instead, the whites of their eyes resemble silver. As the scout explains, "Both the rulers and the common people of this nation have white eyes without black pupils. The whites of their eyes resemble silver; hence it is called the Kingdom of Silver Eyes." (這一國的君民人等，兩隻眼都是白的，沒有烏珠，眼白似銀，故此叫銀眼國)[140] Eunuch Sanbao then recalls the Kingdom of Golden Eyes and asks whether its

[138] Harry E. Cross, "South American Bullion Production and Export 1550-1750," in *Precious Metals in the Later Medieval and Early Modern Worlds* (Durham, N.C: Carolina Academic Press, 1983), 403-404.
[139] Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, Vol. II (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 198.
[140] Luo, *Sanbao*, 80: 1026.

inhabitants' eyes likewise resemble gold. The scout replies, "Their eyes do not exactly resemble gold, but they do have a yellowish hue." (雖不像金子，到底是黃的)[141]

Yet the apparent symmetry between the Kingdom of Golden Eyes and the Kingdom of Silver Eyes quickly breaks down upon closer examination. While the Kingdom of Silver Eyes receives extensive description—not only of its inhabitants' eyes but also of its resources, customs, and material abundance—the Kingdom of Golden Eyes remains comparatively underdeveloped. Indeed, the only explicit description of the Golden-Eyed people's ocular appearance appears retrospectively in the discussion of the Kingdom of Silver Eyes, where the scout merely notes that their eyes possess a yellowish hue. The novel offers neither a comparable account of their pupils nor an equally elaborate inventory of local products and wealth. This imbalance suggests that the juxtaposition of gold and silver is not intended to establish a symmetrical comparison between precious metals. Rather, the narrative devotes its attention overwhelmingly to silver, reflecting the heightened cultural and economic significance that silver had acquired in the late Ming.

This exchange reveals more than ethnographic curiosity. Rather, it seems that the novelist deliberately integrates the physical form of the human eye—particularly the pupil—with metals of monetary value, mobilizing a visual and semantic association that late-Ming readers would readily recognize. Central to this association is the term "coin's eye" (*qian yan'er* 錢眼兒), which refers to the square hole at the center of traditional Chinese copper coins. Designed to allow coins to be strung together, this feature was a ubiquitous element of everyday monetary experience. In late-Ming medical texts such as the *Puji fang* 普濟方 (*Prescriptions for Universal Relief*), the term "coin's eye" (*qian yan* 錢眼) frequently

[141] Ibid., 80: 1026.

appears as a unit of measurement, denoting size or quantity. [142] In vernacular fiction, however, the term acquires a more explicitly economic and social resonance. In *Jin Ping Mei*, for instance, a brothel madam remarks, "The hole in the coins has the same shape everywhere" (*Tianxiaqian yan'er dou yiyang* 天下錢眼兒都一樣), collapsing bodily desire, monetary exchange, and social circulation into a single metaphor.[143]

Against this semantic and visual backdrop, the "silver eyes" of the foreign kingdom assume layered significance. By associating eye shape and color with precious metals, Luo Maodeng draws on the familiar imagery of coinage—round forms punctuated by a central void—to translate monetary abstraction into embodied difference. The absence of black pupils, replaced by silvery whites, not only marks foreignness but also evokes a world increasingly structured by the circulation of silver. In this sense, the metallic eyes of the Kingdom of Silver Eyes function as a dual sign: they operate simultaneously as a visible marker of ethnic otherness and as a symbolic reflection of the silver-based economic order that underpinned late-Ming global trade. Through this subtle yet potent imagery, *Sanbao* renders economic consciousness visible on the human body itself, embedding global circulation within the very act of seeing.

The connection between metal, economic consciousness, and the Kingdom of Silver Eyes is further elaborated in the dialogue that follows. As is customary whenever the Ming navy approaches a new kingdom, Eunuch Sanbao dispatches a scout in advance to survey the territory. Prior to their arrival at the Kingdom of Silver Eyes, Eunuch Sanbao poses three specific questions. First, he asks about the origin of the kingdom's name—why it is called the "Kingdom of Silver Eyes?" Second, he enquires about the kingdom's natural environment,

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[142] Zhu Su, and Yun Ji, *Puji fang:* [426 *juan* = Universal relieving prescriptions] (Beijing: Renmin weisheng chubanshe, 1958), 76: 695; 273: 43; 300:787; 395:1081; 398: 1143.
[143] Xiaoxiaosheng, and David Tod Roy. *The Plum in the Golden Vase or, Chin P'ing Mei, (Volume One the Gathering)*, Vol. 5 (Princeton University Press, 2013), 15: 308.

particularly its mountains and rivers. While this question appears to concern geography, it implicitly gestures toward the kingdom's material and economic foundations, since mountains rich in resources often serve as the basis of regional wealth. Third, Eunuch Sanbao asks about the kingdom's fortifications and military leadership, signaling a political concern aligned with the Ming court's broader objective of asserting authority over foreign polities. Taken together, these three questions reveal the novelist's deliberate narrative design, organizing the encounter around three intertwined dimensions: symbolic naming, economic resources, and political power.

As the conversation unfolds, Eunuch Sanbao's inquiry into the natural environment gradually shifts into a focused examination of the kingdom's material resources, particularly those of economic value in trade and commerce. This transition underscores the inseparability of geography and economy in the late-Ming imagination. Notably, although the novel offers little detail about the natural environment or resources of the Kingdom of Golden Eyes in earlier chapters, it provides a remarkably detailed account of four key commodities in the Kingdom of Silver Eyes: salt, cinnabar, lime, and turmeric. The asymmetry between these two metallic kingdoms suggests that silver—more than gold—serves as the primary conceptual anchor for the novel's reflection on commerce, circulation, and material value.

The scout explains:

> "Within the kingdom there is a great mountain called Baolin Mountain. Each of its four sides produces a different treasure… One side yields red earth, which is essentially ***yin zhu***; in larger quantities it becomes cinnabar.… The king has appointed four officials to oversee each side of the mountain. Ships from various foreign lands come to purchase these treasures and sell them elsewhere. Are these not four treasures?" 「國中有一座大山，叫做寶林山。山有四面，就出四件寶貝…一面出紅土，就是**銀銖**，大者就是硃砂…國王額設四員官，四面看守。各處番船都來收買，各處去賣，這卻不是四件寶貝？」[144]

[144] Luo, *Sanbao*, 80: 1026.

This passage foregrounds a mode of economic thinking structured around extraction, administration, and circulation. The mountain is not merely scenery but a natural repository of value: its four sides are differentiated, systematically guarded by appointed officials, and incorporated into transregional trade through the regular arrival of foreign merchant ships. The phrase "four treasures" thus does more than enumerate products. It frames the kingdom's prosperity as a function of resource diversification and commercial exchange, embedding economic rationality within the very description of landscape.

I further contend that the novelist intensifies this economic register by fusing material description with linguistic symbolism, most notably through the term *yin zhu* (銀銖, literally "silver in small quantity"). Significantly, *yin zhu* appears at the precise moment when the scout explains the mountain's "red earth," positioning the term at the intersection of natural resource description and economic valuation. In conventional mineralogical discourse, this substance is typically written as *yin zhu* (銀朱) or, in some sources, *yin zhu* (銀硃), both referring to "silver vermilion" closely associated with cinnabar.[145] The novelist's choice to render the term instead as *yin zhu* (銀銖) is therefore striking, as it departs from established orthography.

This orthographic shift is not incidental. By replacing the vermilion radical with the metal radical, the author foregrounds silver's metallic quality and strengthens its association with monetary measurement. In premodern Chinese usage, *zhu* (銖) denotes a small unit of weight and currency, anchoring the passage firmly in the vocabulary of quantification and economic value. Read in this register, *yin zhu* aligns the mountain's resources with the logic

[145] Orthographic variation between "銀朱" and "銀硃" is consistent across extant editions; I have not encountered the form "銀銖" in the editions consulted.

of valuation, administration, and exchange, reinforcing the passage's emphasis on extraction and circulation.

Within the narrative context of the Kingdom of Silver Eyes—where ocular difference has already been foregrounded—the term invites yet another layer of meaning. I suggest that *yin zhu* also encourages a punning interpretation as *yin [yan] zhu* (銀[眼]珠), or "silver [eye] pupils," directly echoing both the kingdom's name and its inhabitants' distinctive silver-colored eyes. This semantic slippage links mineral substance, monetary unit, and bodily feature within a single phrase. Through this layered construction, the novel aligns natural resources with monetary value not only conceptually, but also graphically and phonetically. *Yin zhu* thus functions as a semantic hinge that condenses multiple registers—silver as mineral, silver as money, and silver as embodied difference—into a single, overdetermined term. In doing so, the passage transforms landscape description into an exercise in economic perception, revealing how material environment, linguistic form, and value consciousness converge in the novel's encyclopedic imagination.

The encyclopedic quality of the passage—its attention to commodities, administrative arrangements, and trade routes—also points to the novel's extensive engagement with historical records associated with Zheng He's voyages to the Western Seas. A clear prototype for this description appears in *The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores* (*Yingyai shenglan* 瀛涯勝覽), compiled by Ma Huan 馬歡 (ca. 1380–1460), who accompanied Zheng He on multiple expeditions.[146] A similar account is found in *The Annals of Foreign Nations in the*

[146] For instance, *Yingya shenglan* records as follows, "A large mountain yields four distinct materials from its four sides. On one side, red salt is found, similar to that along coastal region. Workers use iron picks to chisel it out in chunks weighing thirty to forty catties. Since it is not moist, it must be crushed into a fine powder before being used as food. Another side of the mountain produces red earth, with a color resembling vermilion. A third side yields white earth, similar to lime, which is suitable for wall plastering. The fourth side offers yellow earth, the color of turmeric. These valuable resources are overseen by local officials, while merchants from various regions come to trade and make use of them." 有一大山，四面出四樣之物。一面如海邊出之鹽，紅色。人用鐵鋤如打石一般鑿起一塊，有三四十斤者。又不潮溼，欲用食，則搥碎為末而用。一面出紅土，如銀硃(朱)之紅；一面出白土，如石灰，可以粉牆壁；一面出黃土，如薑黃色之黃。俱着頭目守管，各處自

Western Ocean (*Xiyang fanguo zhi* 西洋番國志), written by Gong Zhen 鞏珍 (1371–1457), who joined Zheng He on his seventh voyage.[147] Both texts describe a great mountain in the Kingdom of Hormuz (*Hulumosi guo* 忽魯謨斯國) that yields four materials—salt, cinnabar, lime, and turmeric—distributed across its four sides.

What is particularly striking, however, is the novelist's deliberate recontextualization of those previous texts. Rather than attributing these resources to Hormuz, which appears only briefly in *Sanbao*, the author relocates this richly detailed description to the fictional Kingdom of Silver Eyes. This act of creative appropriation does more than embellish the novel's imaginary geography. By transferring historically grounded economic details from a real trading hub to a fictional polity defined by metallic eyes—and by inserting the semantically charged term *yin zhu*—the novelist fuses empirical knowledge with symbolic invention. In doing so, *Sanbao* transforms accounts of extraction and trade into a narrative mechanism that binds bodily difference to material wealth and global circulation. The Kingdom of Silver Eyes thus emerges not merely as an exotic land but as a conceptual space in which silver-based economic awareness is rendered visible, legible, and quite literally embodied within the fictional world of the novel.

The novelist's awareness of a silver-based economy is particularly evident in the sustained and highly detailed representations of tribute lists that recur throughout *Sanbao*. These lists are not confined to wholly fictional polities, such as the Kingdoms of Silver Eyes and Golden Eyes, but also include partial tribute inventories attributed to historically attested regions, including the Kingdom of Cochin (*Kezhi guo* 柯枝國), the Kingdom of Aden (*Adan guo* 阿丹國), and the Kingdom of Malacca (*Manlajia guo* 滿剌伽國). The appearance of

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有客商來販賣為用。See Ma Huan 馬歡, and Feng Chengjun 馮承鈞, *Yingya shenglan jiaozhu* 瀛涯勝覽校注 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 1970), 66.

147 Gong Zhen 鞏珍, and Da Xiang 向達, *Xiyang fanguo zhi* 西洋番國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000), 56.

these recognizable polities invites comparison with extant historical records associated with Zheng He's expeditions and raises questions about the relationship between literary representation and documentary precedent.

Such a comparison, however, reveals significant departures rather than simple continuity. In official histories and first-hand voyage accounts—most notably texts such as *Yingyai shenglan* and related sources—the contents of tribute offerings are rarely recorded in systematic detail. These works tend to describe local products or regional resources in broad, descriptive terms, rather than presenting formalized or comprehensive tribute lists. One might object that this characterization does not apply to all historical records, pointing in particular to institutional compilations such as the *The Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty* (*Da Ming huidian* 大明會典), which preserve more extensive and regulated accounts of tributary exchanges between the Ming court and foreign polities.[148] Yet even when *Sanbao* is compared with these bureaucratic sources, the divergences remain striking. The tribute lists presented in the novel differ not only in the categories of goods recorded, but also in their specific composition and modes of valuation. These discrepancies suggest that the novelist was not attempting to reproduce administrative documentation, but rather selectively reworking tributary materials to serve distinct narrative and conceptual ends.

Rather than functioning as an extension of institutional record-keeping, *Sanbao* mobilizes the tribute list as a literary device. Even when the novel draws on historically recognizable local specialties, these items often do not correspond directly to those listed in official or semi-official sources. Instead, they are reorganized, elaborated, and transformed within the narrative. This process enables foreign commodities to be reframed according to a silver-based logic of value, commensurability, and circulation—one that exceeds the

[148] In *Da Ming hu dian* 大明會典, for instance, *juan* 105–108 ("Tribute 朝貢," sections 1-4) contain systematic records of tribute items and the scheduling of tributary missions from various foreign polities.

descriptive priorities of historical documentation and foregrounds economic abstraction. The novel thus does not merely transmit inherited knowledge of foreign lands but actively reshapes it through selective amplification and recalibration.

This strategy can be situated within what Hsu Hui-ling has described as the late-Ming "imagination of tribute," particularly as it appears in the "Barbarians" (*zhuyi*) sections of daily-use encyclopedias. Hsu argues that the tribute system served as a central organizing principle of these works, a claim supported by both textual descriptions and visual representations of foreign peoples entering the capital to present offerings.[149] Within this framework, the listing of local products was likely intended not to promote overseas commercial travel, but to instruct readers in the expected forms of tribute within a Sino-centric political order. Foreign goods thus functioned primarily as symbolic markers of political submission and imperial hierarchy, addressing readers as participants in a tributary worldview rather than as economic actors.

My argument builds on this insight but also departs from it by foregrounding the specific economic work performed by *Sanbao*'s tribute lists. While the novel clearly participates in the tributary imagination shared with late-Ming encyclopedic traditions, it places sustained emphasis on rendering foreign goods economically legible. Through the repeated conversion of tribute items into silver equivalents, the precise specification of weights and units, and careful attention to material quality, use, and circulation, *Sanbao* reframes tribute not merely as a ritualized sign of submission, but as a system of commodities intelligible within a silver-based economy. In doing so, the novel invites readers to perceive foreign objects simultaneously as political symbols and as quantifiable economic assets, revealing an acute awareness of the monetary logics that shaped late-Ming global exchange.

[149] Hsu, "Imagined Imperial Tribute," 25.

This emphasis, however, should not be understood as a rejection of encyclopedic practice. Late-Ming daily-use encyclopedias themselves occasionally record silver prices, material characteristics, and practical functions of foreign goods, indicating that economic valuation and commodity knowledge already formed part of the descriptive repertoire available to late-Ming readers.[150] What distinguishes *Sanbao* is not the introduction of these elements, but the consistency and narrative prominence with which they are deployed. Rather than appearing sporadically, monetary conversion, measurement, and material specification recur throughout the novel's tribute lists, producing a sustained framework of economic intelligibility.

As a result, *Sanbao* invites readers to engage with foreign goods across multiple registers of value at once. Tribute continues to signify ritual hierarchy and political submission, yet it is simultaneously reframed as a collection of material objects whose worth can be assessed, compared, and understood in economic terms. Rather than abandoning the tributary imagination identified by Hsu, the novel rearticulates it under late-Ming conditions of intensified global exchange. Imperial order and market awareness thus coexist within the same narrative frame, revealing a mode of representation shaped not only by the desire to stabilize political hierarchy, but also by an acute consciousness of a silver-centered world economy.

To demonstrate how this dual logic operates in practice, the following section examines a selection of foreign commodities from *Sanbao*'s tribute lists, focusing on the ways in which silver-based valuation and detailed material description render these objects economically intelligible within the narrative.

- Five *dan* of ambergris (known for its exquisite fragrance, **priced equivalently to silver**).
- Four pearls (Each of the pearls weighs four and a half *fen*, valuing the price

[150] For a detailed analysis of how late-Ming daily-use encyclopedias incorporate monetary values, material descriptions, and utilitarian information about foreign goods, see chapter 5.

based on weight. **Every four *fen* equals one hundred taels of silver there**).

- Hundred *dan* of Damascus steel (Cut open the sharpening stone and acquire it. There are some natural patterns within it. **The price is doubled compared to silver**).
- Ten *aidai* (**Shaped like glasses; It can aid in clarity while reading, worth a hundred gold**).
- Hundred *dan* of patterned tin (**In our country, there is a large stream where sand is sifted to refine tin. It is cast into the shape of a dipper, called "dipper tin." Each piece weighs one catty and eight *liang*, bound in bundles of ten with rattan for small handles, and forty pieces for large handles, traded in the market**).
- Two boxes of jackfruit (**It is the name of the fruit, grown from seeds, dried, and shaped like a winter melon. Its skin resembles chestnuts, with many prickles, and inside the prickles, there are layers of fruit flesh. It has the best taste**).
- 龍涎香五石 [其香最佳, 價與銀同]
- 珍珠四顆 [俱重四分半, 以分數論價, 每四分重, 彼處值銀一百兩]
- 鑌鐵百擔 [剖礪石中得者，中有自然花紋，價倍於銀]
- 靉靆十枚(狀如眼鏡，觀書可以助明，價值百金)
- 花錫一百擔(本國有一大溪，溪中淘沙煎之成錫，鑄成斗樣，名日斗錫，每塊重一斤八兩，每十塊用藤縛為小把，四十塊為大把，通市交易)
- 波羅蜜二匣(果名，實生，乾，形如冬瓜，皮似栗子多刺，刺內有肉層迭，味最佳) [151]

Among the tribute items described are ambergris, pearls, Damascus steel, *aidai* (optical aids), patterned tin, and jackfruit. What distinguishes these descriptions is not merely their sensory richness but the consistent translation of material value into monetary equivalents. Ambergris is noted as "priced equivalently to silver"; pearls are evaluated by precise weight, with explicit conversion into taels of silver; and Damascus steel is described as worth twice the price of silver. Even when silver equivalence is not explicitly stated, as in the cases of *aidai*, tin, and jackfruit, the items are described with a degree of material specificity—

[151] Luo, *Sanbao*, 60: 775, 779; 86: 1106; 50: 650.

function, form, method of production, and market circulation—that renders them legible as commodities within a broader economy of exchange.

In *Sanbao*, scenes of tribute presentation typically occur as the Ming fleet prepares to depart from a foreign kingdom. The act of offering local specialties functions on the surface as a ritualized expression of political submission and willingness to conform to the Ming-centered international order. Yet the narrative attention devoted to these lists exceeds what would be necessary for a purely diplomatic gesture. Items are carefully cataloged, often accompanied by notes on their fragrance, taste, utility, origin, and—most significantly—their monetary value measured in silver or gold. The repeated conversion of diverse objects into a common denominator of silver suggests the emergence of a universalized system of value capable of subsuming heterogeneous materials within a single economic logic.

The first three items in the sample lists—ambergris, pearls, and Damascus steel—are particularly telling in this regard. This capacity to translate sensory, functional, and cultural differences into monetary equivalence reflects a late-Ming economic consciousness shaped by global circulation. Silver here functions not merely as currency but as an epistemic tool: it renders foreign commodities comparable, commensurable, and intelligible within a unified framework of exchange.

At the same time, the detailed treatment of items such as *aidai*, patterned tin, and jackfruit exemplifies the novel's encyclopedic narrative mode. These descriptions appeal to readers interested in acquiring concrete knowledge of foreign products—how they are made, used, traded, and valued—rather than merely marveling at their exoticism. This strategy suggests an implied readership that may have included merchants, consumers, and others attuned to the expanding world of overseas trade. By providing equivalent silver prices alongside vivid descriptions, the novelist simultaneously satisfies curiosity and cultivates economic literacy.

This narrative approach reveals a productive tension at the heart of *Sanbao*. Even as the novel projects a Sino-centric political order in which foreign kingdoms symbolically submit to Ming authority, it reveals a sustained fascination with the realities of a thriving global marketplace characterized by active trade and material circulation. The tribute lists thus operate at the intersection of ideology and economy: they reaffirm hierarchical political relations while registering the transformative force of commerce that increasingly structured late-Ming life. Against this backdrop of global trade network, *Sanbao*'s meticulous attention to the silver-based valuation of ostensibly local tribute goods reveals a keen awareness of China's entanglement within global circuits of exchange. Foreign specialties are no longer merely symbolic tokens of submission; they are commodities destined for market circulation.

Finally, I suggest that Luo Maodeng's narrative strategy reflects a deliberate fusion of encyclopedic conventions and vernacular literary techniques aimed at broadening the novel's appeal. The use of accessible language, repetition, and relatively limited psychological development of protagonists enhances narrative legibility and commercial viability. At the same time, the exhaustive detailing of tribute items resonates with the encyclopedic tradition and with the Ming intellectual ideal of "the investigation of things (*gewu zhizhi*)." As scholars such as Craig Clunas have noted, this intellectual orientation underpinned the flourishing production of encyclopedic literature in the Ming period and laid the groundwork for the evidential scholarship (*kaozheng* 考證／*kaoju xue* 考據學) of the late Ming and early Qing.[152] Emphasizing empirical observation, textual verification, and factual accuracy, these intellectual currents align closely with *Sanbao*'s sustained effort to render foreign worlds knowable through material description. In this sense, the novel's tribute lists do more than catalog exotic goods: they crystallize a moment in which political hierarchy, economic

[152] Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness*, 113-114.

rationality, and encyclopedic knowledge converge within a silver-centered vision of the world.

3.2 Redefining Self and Otherness: Bodily Vision, Pupil, and Hierarchy of Value

This section examines how *Sanbao* mobilizes bodily imagery—most notably the motif of "colored" eyes—to articulate a materialized and hierarchical vision of political order. I argue that the novel's representations of foreign bodies, particularly in the Kingdom of Silver Eyes, move beyond racialized description to function as symbolic mechanisms through which selfhood, otherness, and perceived superiority are actively produced. By inscribing political meaning onto visible bodily traits, *Sanbao* renders abstract hierarchies legible through the body, fusing perception, material value, and authority into a coherent ideological structure.

The imaginative construct of "colored pupils" occupies a central position in this system. Eye color operates not merely as a sign of foreignness but as a condensed visual metaphor that links bodily difference to moral judgment and political discernment. In the Kingdom of Silver Eyes, ocular difference becomes emblematic of a broader cultural logic shaped by silver-based economic consciousness and Sino-centric political values. To possess different eyes is not only to look different, but to see—and to judge—differently, thereby occupying a distinct position within the moral and political order of the world.

This logic builds upon a long-standing tradition within the Confucian classics of distinguishing the Han self from "barbarian others" through visible bodily signs. Early formulations emphasized hairstyle and clothing practices, encapsulated in the phrase "with unbound hair and garments fastened left over right" (*pifa zuoren* 披髮左衽). As interactions with Central and West Asian peoples intensified, these markers expanded to include vivid bodily descriptions such as prominent noses, curly hair, and full beards. Such traits were never neutral ethnographic details; they often associated as moralized indicators that

reinforced a hierarchical worldview in which bodily appearance indexed cultural legitimacy and political proximity.[153]

As Chiung-yun Evelyn Liu has noted, non-Han figures such as Jin Bifeng are portrayed through conspicuously foreign physical features, including a full beard, blue eyes, and a nose likened to a mountain peak. [154] Such descriptions foreground the body as a site where difference is rendered visually apprehensible and ideologically legible. Building on this representational strategy, the novel elevates eye color in particular to a privileged marker of hierarchy: ocular difference becomes a condensed visual sign through which political judgment and moral capacity are assessed.

This logic is articulated most explicitly in the novel's portrayal of the Kingdom of Silver Eyes. In Chapter 80, when Eunuch Sanbao learns from his scouts that the kingdom's name derives from its inhabitants' "white eyes without black pupils," he immediately interprets this physical trait as evidence that the people are "having eyes but lacking pupils" (*you yan wu zhu* 有眼無珠), since they don't come to welcome and receive the two Ming marshals.[155] Commonly used to denote an inability to recognize talent or discern significance, the proverb—"having eyes but lacking pupils" (*you yan wu zhu*)— here converts bodily difference into a moralized form of misrecognition. The people's failure to welcome the Ming envoys is thus rendered intelligible not merely as a breach of diplomatic protocol, but as a visible symptom of their incapacity to recognize legitimate authority.

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[153] Both scholars discuss how physical appearance functions as one of the markers of cultural otherness. Beards as markers of non-Han identity are also amply found in pre-modern paintings and sculpture. Li notes that Zhongyong was criticized for "cutting his hair and tattooing his body, regarding nakedness as his adornment;" Liu argues that western monks in premodern Chinese fiction are frequently portrayed as villains and examines the symbolic association between beards and non-Han identity. See Wai-yee Li, "Cultural Identity and Cultural Difference in *Zuozhuan*," *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2020): 10. doi:10.1215/23290048-8313494; Liu, "Knowledge, Emotion, and Imagination," 123.

[154] Liu, "Knowledge, Emotion, and Imagination," 120-121.

[155] Luo, *Sanbao*, 80: 1026.

This symbolic linkage between ocular features and political judgment is reinforced later in the narrative. In Chapter 84, the proverb "having eyes but lacking pupils" is invoked repeatedly as Jin Bifeng explicitly connects the people's "white eyes" (*bai yan* 白眼) and "lack of (black) pupils" (*wu zhu* 無珠) to flawed character and misguided political ambition. Through this repetition, bodily appearance is naturalized as the outward manifestation of moral failure, providing a seemingly self-evident justification for political subordination.

> Jin Bifeng instructed them, "Your stubbornness and resistance are understandable given that you have white eyes without black pupils and are truly ignorant and ungrateful. Fine, from now on, none of you can establish a kingdom or crown a king on this land, nor can you hold any official positions." The king of the Kingdom of Silver Eyes responded, "If we don't establish our own kingdom, we silver-eyed individuals will be rejected by the other barbarian tribes." Jin Bifeng replied, "If you don't establish a kingdom, you will all have black pupils like other people and will surely be accepted by the other tribes." Buddha's words are jade words emanating from a golden mouth. Afterwards, the silver eyes of the people of Kingdom of Silver Eyes indeed developed black pupils, and thus the kingdom disappeared from historical records. (國師) 吩咐道：「怪不得你們負固不服，本等你們是個白眼無珠，不識好歹。也罷，自今以後，也不許在這裡立國，也不許你們在這裡為王，也不許你們眾人在這裡做甚麼番官番吏。」番王道：「我們若不自為一國，我們這個銀眼，卻入不得那些番子的邦。」國師道：「不立國，自然都是烏眼珠兒，自然入得邦。」佛爺的言語，就是金口玉言。後來銀眼國果真的白眼睛卻都變做了烏珠兒，故此銀眼國不見經傳。[156]

This episode marks the novel's most explicit convergence of bodily imagery, political submission, and cultural normativity. Jin Bifeng—despite being described elsewhere as a "foreign monk with blue eyes" (*huseng biyan* 胡僧碧眼)—acts here as a decisive agent of

[156] Ibid., 84: 1083.

Ming authority.[157] By prohibiting independent statehood and denying access to political office, he compels the kingdom to exchange sovereignty for bodily normalization. Political incorporation is thus achieved not through negotiation or persuasion, but through the visible correction of the body itself.

What is especially significant is that this transformation specifically results in black pupils. Black pupils are implicitly constructed as the normative and most socially acceptable mode of vision, functioning as a visual shorthand for civility, discernment, and political legitimacy. The episode thus reveals an underlying Han-centric logic in which bodily traits associated with the Han body are elevated as universal standards. Although Jin Bifeng himself remains marked as foreign, the people of the Kingdom of Silver Eyes are rendered acceptable only through conformity to this visual norm.

Seen from this perspective, the transformation of silver eyes into black pupils operates as an ideological fantasy of assimilation—one marked less by confidence than by anxiety. On the one hand, the episode registers the author's acute awareness of a late-Ming world increasingly shaped by silver circulation, global exchange, and material transformation. On the other, it betrays a desire to contain these unsettling forces by reinscribing dynastic authority and inherited moral hierarchies. By imagining the disappearance of "silver eyes," the novel posits the erasure of visible difference as a symbolism of political submission. Bodily normalization thus functions as a symbolic strategy through which the disruptive implications of a silver-based economy are neutralized, restoring a sense of moral clarity and political order grounded in traditional norms.

In this sense, the episode does more than assert Ming dominance over foreign others; it functions as a compensatory narrative mechanism. Through the dramatization of bodily transformation, *Sanbao* seeks to manage anxieties generated by a rapidly changing world in

[157] Ibid., 4: 51.

which established systems of value, perception, and governance were increasingly strained by global economic integration. The erasure of "silver eyes" imagines the subordination of material difference and economic otherness not only as a political victory, but ultimately as an attempt to inscribe the emerging global order, shaped by trade among sovereign states, into a traditional Sinocentric vision of Chinese hegemony.

This narrative logic finds a revealing historical parallel in early-Ming strategies of ethnic incorporation, particularly those associated with the Hongwu Emperor. In the aftermath of the Yuan dynasty, Hongwu faced the challenge of ruling a population that included substantial numbers of Mongols and *semu* (色目) peoples—groups that had previously occupied privileged positions within a rigid four-tier ethnic hierarchy.[158] Rather than affirming ethnic plurality, Hongwu pursued assimilation as a calculated political strategy aimed at stabilizing the new dynasty and reasserting a Han-centered order. His edicts publicly deemphasized ethnic origin in favor of moral standing and ability, projecting an image of impartial governance, while subsequent policies explicitly prohibited Mongols from marrying Mongols and *semu* from marrying *semu*, mandating intermarriage with Han Chinese instead.[159] These measures were designed to dilute distinct identities over time, transforming difference into sameness as a means of consolidating imperial authority.

Read in this light, Hongwu's policies reveal an approach to incorporation that was cautious and instrumental. Inclusion was permitted only insofar as it facilitated the erosion of cultural difference and reinforced hierarchical norms defined by the Ming state. The transformation of silver eyes into black pupils becomes an ideological fantasy in which global difference, silver-based economic power, and alternative political possibilities are

[158] Stephen G. Haw, "The Semu Ren 色目人 in the Yuan Empire," *Ming Qing Yanjiu* 18, no. 1 (2013): 39–63. Haw argues that previous scholarship has largely assumed *Semu ren* were predominantly Muslims, and many were Persians, but he wants to suggest that the vast majority of *Semu ren* were Turks, both Muslim and non-Muslim.
[159] Li Dongyang, and Shen Shixing, *Da Ming huidian* 大明會典 (Taipei: Dongnan shubanshe, 1963), 249, 367.

imagined as fully absorbed and neutralized by Ming moral authority. Through this materialized politics of vision, bodily difference is rendered manageable, legible, and correctable.

Seen across these interlocking layers—moral judgment, political and institutional normalization—the motif of colored eyes emerges as a powerful mechanism through which *Sanbao* negotiates late-Ming anxieties. Bodily visibility becomes the site where global economic awareness, political hierarchy, and cultural orthodoxy converge. In staging the disappearance of silver eyes and the normalization of vision itself, the novel does not merely affirm Ming superiority; it also registers—and attempts to contain—the destabilizing pressures of a world increasingly shaped by silver circulation, ethnic plurality, and competing systems of value.

3.3 Competing Value and Perceptions through Benefits and Rewards

As China became increasingly integrated into a global culture of trade and consumption, economic expansion and the influx of silver reshaped social hierarchies and systems of value in the late Ming. The growing prominence of merchant wealth challenged the moral authority and cultural prestige traditionally claimed by the literati, giving rise to competing ideologies that interpreted social relations through profit, exchange, and material reward. Within this transformed economic landscape, precious metals and foreign commodities did not merely circulate as objects of trade; they also acquired new symbolic force, influencing how value, merit, and loyalty were perceived and negotiated.

Sanbao reflects and actively engages with this shifting value system. Throughout the narrative, gold, silver, and other material rewards function as mediating forces that reshape perception—of others and of the self—by translating political, military, and moral actions into calculable forms of benefit. Material reward becomes a powerful narrative mechanism through which authority is exercised, loyalty is incentivized, and bodies themselves are

rendered legible within an economy of exchange. At the same time, the novel stages moments of tension and resistance that expose the ethical limits of a worldview increasingly governed by self-interest and monetary calculation.

This section examines how *Sanbao* dramatizes competing perceptions of value through scenes of benefit, reward, and sacrifice. It is divided into two parts. The first analyzes the Ming army's promise of one thousand taels of silver to anyone who captures Madam Bai 百夫人, the female general of the Kingdom of Silver Eyes, and considers how Madam Bai subsequently comes to perceive herself—albeit playfully—as a "commodity" within this economy of reward. The second turns to the motif of eye-sacrifice, examining both a Buddhist-originated tale and the battlefield episode in which General and Prince Consort Halihu 哈里虎 of the Kingdom of Golden Eyes plucks out his own eye. I argue that these acts of eye-sacrifice function as a symbolic counterpoint to commodified value, articulating Confucian virtues of loyalty, righteousness, and self-transcendence in deliberate tension with a silver-centered logic of reward and self-preservation. Together, these episodes reveal how *Sanbao* negotiates late-Ming anxieties over value by juxtaposing material incentives with moral refusal. Rather than simply endorsing or rejecting the logic of reward, the novel stages a complex dialogue between economic rationality and ethical idealism, exposing the unstable foundations of value in a world increasingly shaped by global circulation and material exchange.

Seeing the Self as Commodity: Silver, Reward, and the Logic of Exchange

This section examines how *Sanbao* stages a late-Ming logic of value in which military service, bodily violence, and even the self are increasingly apprehended through the language of exchange, reward, and monetary calculation. Focusing on Chapter 81, I analyze the encounter between the Ming army and Madam Bai, a female general of the Kingdom of

Silver Eyes. I argue that, within a narrative world shaped by benefits, trade, and material incentives, military obligation is reconfigured as a transactional practice, and Madam Bai's body becomes legible as a commodity assigned a calculable price. To illuminate this dynamic, the analysis proceeds from two interrelated perspectives: first, the motivations and actions of the Ming soldiers; and second, Madam Bai's own reflexive recognition of her commodified position.

Traditionally, soldiers and generals in Chinese narrative are portrayed as acting in accordance with Confucian ideals of loyalty, righteousness, and the protection of ruler and people. *Sanbao*, however, repeatedly complicates this moral framework by foregrounding material incentives as the primary catalyst for action. An earlier episode in Chapter 59 already signals this shift. There, four Daoist immortals demand "ten thousand taels of gold and one hundred thousand taels of silver" (要化一萬兩金子，十萬兩銀子) from the Kingdom of Guli 古俚國 in exchange for defending it against the Ming army. Protection of a polity is thus framed not as moral obligation or altruistic intervention, but as a service rendered in return for precious metals. As the immortals declare, "As long as you produce gold and silver, demonstrate your sincerity, and take action, we brothers guarantee peace and safety for your entire nation" (只要你拿出金子、銀子來，發了心，出了手，我們師兄師弟，保管你舉國平安). [160] Here, gold and silver explicitly displace ethical commitment as the basis of political and military action.

This transactional logic reaches its most explicit and consequential form in Chapter 81 during the confrontation between the Ming army and Madam Bai. Seeking to avenge the death of her husband, a general of the Kingdom of Silver Eyes, Madam Bai proves formidable: despite the combined efforts of four Ming generals, her magical weapons and

[160] Luo, *Sanbao*, 59: 763-764.

martial prowess initially drive the Ming forces into retreat and fear. At this impasse, the narrative's turning point is not a moral exhortation or strategic insight, but a proclamation of reward issued by the Ming commander.

According to this proclamation, any soldier who captures Madam Bai alive will receive one thousand taels of silver (能拿住百夫人者，官給賞銀一千兩); those who decapitate her will be granted five hundred taels of silver (斬首者，官給賞銀五百兩); and for every other foreign soldier killed, ten taels of silver will be awarded per head (其餘的番子，一顆頭賞銀十兩). [161] The text is explicit about the effects of this announcement: "Under generous rewards, there are always brave men. The four generals, thinking of those one thousand taels of silver—who would not set their sights on Madam Bai? And the soldiers, thinking of ten taels of silver, who would not rush to take the heads of the barbarian troops?" (厚賞之下，必有勇夫。四員大將想著那一千兩銀子，哪一個不想著百夫人？這些軍馬想著十兩銀子，哪一個不掀翻番子的頭來).[162]

What emerges here is a two-tiered structure of transaction. On the first level, Ming soldiers exchange their labor, risk, and violence for the promise of silver reward. On the second level, the foreign bodies, including Madam Bai's living body and head, and the heads of other foreign soldiers, are converted into discrete units of silver. The battlefield thus becomes a market-like space in which bodies circulate as commodities and silver functions as the universal equivalent that renders them commensurable. The traditional ethical virtues of loyalty, bravery and righteousness are, however, no longer prioritized by the Ming army. Instead, military service is motivated by the prospect of monetary gain.

[161] Ibid., 81: 1042.
[162] Ibid., 81: 1042.

This episode can be situated within a broader late-Ming literati's anxiety about the growing power of monetary valuation. As Handler-Spitz Rivi observes, Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602)—a contemporary of Luo Maodeng, a prominent heterodox thinker, and an official during the Wanli period—repeatedly expressed concern about the instability and possible falsification not only of salable objects but also of words, identities, reputations, and social relationships in his writings. Underlying these concerns was a broader anxiety about economic value and the difficulty of distinguishing the genuine from the counterfeit. Handler-Spitz therefore argues that Li's writings reveal a nostalgic desire to reestablish reliable and enduring standards of value.[163] Read in this context, this episode suggests that Luo similarly sought to restore traditional moral values while expressing a broader mistrust of an emerging transactional logic that emphasized monetary value.

Yet the commodification of human bodies in this episode also carries a gendered dimension. Madam Bai's body is assigned two precise prices: one for her capture alive and another for her severed head. The proclamation thus transforms her from a powerful foreign female general into a monetarily valued object. This transformation echoes the long-standing representation of women as commodities in Chinese narratives, most prominently in stories of courtesans and their scholar-lovers, in which women's bodies, talents, and emotions circulate through systems of purchase, gift-giving, and moral testing. As Patrick Hanan observes in his discussion of late-imperial fiction, such narratives often follow a culturally familiar pattern in which the singing-girl is initially positioned as an object of consumption, yet later reclaims moral authority through marriage, domestic reform, and the strategic management of wealth. For contemporary readers, Hanan notes, this logic "was no question at all," since they were accustomed to plots in which a courtesan, after her lover has

[163] Handler-Spitz Rivi, "Money and Li Zhi's Economies of Rhetoric." In *Symptoms of an Unruly Age: Li Zhi and Cultures of Early Modernity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 90. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcwn2nt.9.

squandered his resources on her, ultimately marries him and reforms him according to the ethical ideals of his social class. [164]

Within this narrative tradition, a woman's status as a commodified object is not treated as permanent; rather, it serves as an intermediate stage that can be overcome through moral reform, marriage, and the restoration of social order. Once the woman's role shifts—from courtesan to wife, as in the paradigmatic *The Tale of Li Wa* (*Li Wa zhuan* 李娃傳)—her character and authority shift with it, allowing bodily value to be recuperated within a Confucian moral framework, even to the point of a protective, quasi-maternal ascendancy over the male protagonist.

Read against this narrative tradition, Madam Bai's ironic self-pricing appears all the more unsettling. Her remark—"one thousand taels of silver…the price of selling a female body; five hundred taels…the price of selling a head" (*qian liang yinzi, mai le ge nushen; wu bai liang yinzi, mai le yi ke shouji* 千兩銀子，賣了個女身；五百兩銀子，賣了一顆首級)—does not simply repeat a familiar trope of female commodification.[165] Rather, it marks a moment in which the conditions for moral recuperation have been structurally foreclosed. On the battlefield, exchange is administered by the Ming state and denominated in a single monetary equivalent. What remains to Madam Bai is a limited capacity for refusal. By fighting against the Ming army, she attempts to interrupt the process of conversion itself, preserving her body from being translated into silver.

This sharper form of commodification invites comparison with a longer narrative tradition of bodily self-sale and sacrifice in late-imperial literature—one that frequently pivots from economic exchange toward moral elevation. Stories of siege, famine, and wartime desperation, often preserved in historical sources or literary collections such as the

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[164] Patrick Hanan, "The Making of The Pearl-Sewn Shirt and The Courtesan's Jewel Box," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, no. 33 (1973), 148. doi:10.2307/2718887.
[165] Luo, *Sanbao*, 81: 1042.

Extensive Records of the Taiping Era (*Taiping guangji* 太平廣記), repeatedly depict women selling their bodies or sacrificing themselves in order to sustain familial obligation or ethical bonds. Such narratives do not simply stage material exchange; they invite ethical interpretation, transforming bodily loss into a site of moral meaning.

Stories regarding "The Siege of Yangzhou," (*Yangzhou zhi wei* 揚州之圍) later reworked in the late-Ming text *The Stones Nod Their Heads* (*Shi diantou* 石點頭), have been read by Patrick Hanan as paradigmatic cases in which bodily sacrifice ultimately reaffirms a Neo-Confucian moral order rather than destabilizing it. Drawing on historical materials, Hanan argues that Langxian's adaptation plunges readers into a world of Confucian moral exempla, in which extreme bodily suffering is recuperated within an orthodox ethical framework emphasizing righteousness, loyalty, and filial devotion.[166] From this perspective, acts of bodily self-sale do not undermine moral order; they serve to stabilize it.

By contrast, Wang Xian, examining late-Ming rewritings of historical materials—including Feng Menglong's adaptations of stories derived from *Taiping guangji*, such as *The Wife of Zhou Di* (*Zhou Di qi* 周迪妻)—argues that Langxian's version in *Shi diantou*, including "The Siege of Yangzhou," does not simply endorse the moral rhetoric of self-sacrifice. Instead, Wang suggests that these narratives exaggerate bodily self-destruction in order to expose—and even satirize—the coercive force of late-Ming moral exhortations that celebrated self-sacrifice for righteousness as an ethical ideal. What appears as moral exemplarity may thus function as a critique of moralizing discourse itself.[167] Despite their differences, both readings converge on a crucial structural point: even when bodily self-sale is initially framed through economic exchange, it remains legible within an ethical horizon.

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[166] Patrick Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 123.
[167] Xian Wang, "Langxian's Dilemma Over the Cult of Martyrdom and Filial Piety: A World of Emptiness in 'The Siege of Yangzhou,'" *Ming Studies* 2015, no. 72 (2015), 49.

Whether affirmed as Confucian exempla or ironized as moral excess, bodily sacrifice is still expected to generate meaning beyond price.

Madam Bai's case differs in an important respect. Like the women in these earlier narratives, her body becomes entangled in relations of exchange. Yet the terms of that exchange are no longer defined by beauty, marriage, filial devotion, or moral self-sacrifice. As Chapter 81 demonstrates, as a widow seeking vengeance for her husband and resisting the Ming army, Madam Bai enters the battlefield as an enemy combatant. Within the Ming military system, her body is rendered commensurable with silver, becoming indistinguishable from the severed heads and captured bodies through which military merit and reward are calculated.

Although her actions embody the Confucian virtues of loyalty, chastity, and devotion to her husband, they do not shield her from commodification. Instead, her body is subsumed into a military economy in which enemy bodies are converted into monetary rewards. *Sanbao* thus foregrounds the irony that Confucian virtue itself becomes entangled in the logic of commodification. Madam Bai's mockery of the Ming army's attempt to assign a monetary value to her body exposes a world in which silver-based valuation overrides ethical distinction. In this sense, the episode does not simply reiterate older tropes of bodily exchange. Rather, it radicalizes them by staging a moment in which silver functions as the dominant grammar through which bodies, labor, and violence acquire value and intelligibility.

This episode also resonates powerfully with the symbolic logic of the "Silver Eyes." While the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Silver Eyes are marked by ocular imagery associated with material value, it is the Ming army that most fully performs a silver-centered mode of perception: soldiers are mobilized through quantified rewards, enemy bodies are priced and circulated, and military success is calibrated in taels rather than virtue. The irony

is pointed. “Silver” does not simply name the foreign other; it names a regime of valuation that the Ming state itself deploys with exceptional clarity. The battlefield thus becomes a privileged site where a late-Ming economy of incentive—rooted in calculation, exchange, and material reward—is rendered narratively visible.

At this stage, the hierarchy of materials—silver, gold, and jade—does not yet function as an autonomous symbolic system. Rather, it provides the conditions under which silver acquires such power as a medium of exchange, translating bodies, labor, and violence into commensurable value. Gold appears more sporadically as a marker of elevated distinction, while jade—elsewhere in *Sanbao*—signifies a form of authority that cannot be purchased or earned through transactional service.

Yet *Sanbao* also deploys precious materials within a symbolic regime structured by political hierarchy. This logic emerges most clearly in scenes of tribute and imperial bestowal, where objects such as ceremonial headwear, imperial edicts, officials’ caps, and precious-metal seals function not as instruments of exchange but as markers of political status and incorporation. In Chapters 50 and 61, the kings of Malacca and Guli receive imperial edicts and silver seals recognizing their authority under Ming suzerainty.[168] These scenes closely correspond to historical records in the *Ming shi*, where silver seals served as institutional markers of hierarchy and submission.[169] Rather than functioning as neutral instruments of authentication, the silver seal materializes a logic of incorporation: foreign rulership is acknowledged yet simultaneously reclassified as delegated authority under imperial oversight.

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[168] Luo, *Sanbao*, 50: 649; 61: 790.

[169] According to these sources, Malacca was initially subject to Siam (ancient Thailand) until its leader traveled to the Ming court, where the Yongle Emperor conferred upon him the title of King of Malacca along with an edict and seal. Similarly, the leader of the Kingdom of Guli received the title of King and a seal upon visiting Nanjing. See Zhang, et al., *Ming shi*, 8416, 8440.

This logic becomes even clearer when the same silver seals are bestowed upon Ming military officials.[170] By extending an identical material marker to foreign kings and domestic commanders alike, the Ming court symbolically positions both within a shared administrative hierarchy, effectively imagining foreign rulers as officials within imperial governance rather than sovereign equals. At the same time, the system remains carefully stratified. Gold is reserved for figures closer to the imperial center, while jade—most prominently embodied in the imperial jade seal—marks sovereign authority that cannot circulate through exchange.

Taken together, these scenes show how silver reduces bodies to objects of calculation. It is precisely this condition that renders Madam Bai's self-pricing so disturbing. The battlefield economy leaves no space for ethical transformation—only calculation. It is against this silver-saturated regime of valuation that the following section's turn to eye-sacrifice must be examined.

Righteous Eye-Sacrifice: Moral Vision and the Rejection of Commodified Value

Building on the preceding analysis of silver-based valuation and bodily commodification, this section switches to the motif of eye-sacrifice as a counter-discourse to materialized exchange. I argue that *Sanbao* deploys eye-sacrifice as both a narrative device and a symbolic act through which moral vision is asserted precisely at the moment when bodily value threatens to collapse into price. While the motif draws heavily on Buddhist symbolic traditions surrounding the eye, the novel ultimately reconfigures it to articulate Confucian virtues—most notably filial piety and political loyalty—against a late-Ming world increasingly governed by calculation, reward, and material incentive.

[170] For instance, in Chapter 15, the Yongle Emperor grants sitting-dragon gold seals to Eunuch Sanbao and Vice Commander Wang, while generals receive standing-tiger silver seals; in Chapter 18, Jin Bifeng is honored with a gold plaque bearing the inscription "Great Ming Master Jin Bifeng." See Luo, *Sanbao*, 15: 191, 193-196; 18: 235.

Within the symbolic economy of *Sanbao*, the eye has already been established as a privileged site of judgment, perception, and value. Earlier chapters associate ocular difference with political discernment and moral capacity, most notably in the Kingdom of Silver Eyes, where vision is entangled with monetary calculation and the logic of exchange. Against this background, the act of sacrificing an eye acquires particular force. To relinquish sight is not merely to incur bodily loss, but to withdraw from a regime in which seeing is inseparable from valuing, pricing, and judging.

The prominence of the eye is deeply indebted to Buddhist concept. In Buddhist thought, the eye signifies far more than physical sight; it functions as a gateway to wisdom, enlightenment, and ethical perception. Beyond the well-known doctrine of the "Five Eyes."[171] These traditions underscore a long-standing association between ocular intervention, spiritual insight, and bodily transformation. Given the religious knowledge circulating among late-Ming literati, such symbolic resources would have been readily available to a novelist like Luo Maodeng.

In his Buddhist *chuanqi* drama *Guanshiyin xiuxing Xiangshan ji* 觀世音修行香山記 (*Guanshiyin's Cultivation on Mount Xiang*), Luo reworked the well-known legend of Princess Miaoshan.[172] In that narrative, Miaoshan refuses marriage in order to pursue Buddhist cultivation, incurs her father's violent punishment, and ultimately sacrifices her eyes and hands to cure him when he falls gravely ill. Crucially, this sacrifice is not exchanged for reward, recognition, or compensation. Bodily loss produces not equivalence but transcendence: Miaoshan attains enlightenment and is transformed into a bodhisattva

[171] Katja Triplett, "Using the Golden Needle: Nagaljuna Bodhisattva's Ophthalmological Treatise and Other Sources in the Essentials of Medical Treatment," in *Buddhism and Medicine: An Anthology of Premodern Sources* (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2017), 543-544.
[172] Liu Cunren 柳存仁, *Lundun suojian Zhongguo xiaoshuo shumu tiyao* 倫敦所見中國小說書目提要 [*Chinese Popular Fiction in Two London Libraries*] (Beijing: Shumuwenxian chubanshe, 1982), 61:151.

endowed with a thousand eyes and hands. Here, the eye moves decisively beyond the logic of exchange, becoming an ethical substance whose value cannot be quantified or returned.

Notably, in Chapter 11, *Sanbao* explicitly recounts the Buddhist story of Princess Miaoshan, embedding it directly within the narrative. This incorporation is significant. As Neo-Confucianism had long integrated Confucian ethical discourse with elements drawn from Buddhism and Daoism, such narratives function in the novel not as doctrinal deviations, but as resources through which Confucian virtues are articulated and intensified. Acts of bodily sacrifice—particularly the sacrifice of eyes—thus resonate with established expressions of filial devotion within Chinese tradition, such as *gegu* 割股, the practice of cutting one's thigh to prepare medicinal broth for an ailing parent.[173] Across these practices, the physical body becomes the medium through which moral commitment is made visible.

This logic is articulated through a dialogue between Jin Bifeng and a eunuch official dispatched by the Yongle Emperor. As the eunuch observes:

> "Since ancient times, people have acted righteously by giving away wealth. When have we ever seen someone act righteously by sacrificing their life?"
> 黃門官道：「自古只有個仗義疏財，哪裡有個仗義疏命的？」
>
> Jin Bifeng replies: "...there was once a princess, daughter of King Miaozhuang, who devoted herself to spiritual cultivation at Mount Xiangshan. When her father fell ill and required flesh, bones, hands, and eyes to prepare a healing broth, she willingly sacrificed her hands and eyes to save him. This profound act of compassion transformed her into the Bodhisattva Guanyin, manifesting a thousand hands and eyes to aid those in suffering, embodying boundless mercy and compassion, and ultimately achieving the full enlightenment of Guanyin."
> 長老（金碧峰）道：「…..又有個妙莊王女香山修行，為因父王染疾，要骨肉手眼煎湯作引子，就卸下手眼，救取父王，以致現出千手千眼，救苦求難、大慈大悲，才登觀世音正果…..」[174]

[173] Maram Epstein, *Orthodox Passions: Narrating Filial Love during the High Qing* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019), 95-102.
[174] Luo, *Sanbao*, 11: 143.

This passage examines a conversation between Jin Bifeng and the eunuch dispatched by the Yongle Emperor, in which the eunuch expounds upon the concept of sacrificing personal interests for the sake of righteousness, delineating two distinct levels of sacrifice. The first level draws upon the traditional Chinese proverb "acting righteously by giving away wealth" (*zhang yi shu cai* 仗義疏財), which advocates for individuals to relinquish their wealth in alignment with the Confucian ideal of righteousness. This form of sacrifice, however, pertains solely to material possessions. By contrast, the second level, as described by the eunuch, entails "acting righteously by giving away one's life" (*zhang yi shu ming* 仗義疏命), a far more profound form of sacrifice that involves a greater risk to one's survival and directly contravenes the innate instinct for self-preservation.[175]

To refute the eunuch's claim that no one sacrifices their life for righteousness, Jin Bifeng offers several counterexamples, including the Buddhist story of Princess Miaoshan, who sacrifices her hands and eyes to prepare a healing broth for her father. However, this exchange may initially appear ambiguous to readers, as Jin Bifeng does not explicitly frame Princess Miaoshan's actions as an act of filial piety. Instead, he situates them within the broader framework of righteousness (*yi* 義), aligning with Confucian virtues and emphasizing the willingness to forgo personal interests in the pursuit of moral and ethical ideals.

Within Confucian moral discourse, the concept of righteousness (*yi*) functions as an overarching ethical principle that encompasses, rather than excludes, virtues such as filial piety (*xiao* 孝) and loyalty (*zhong* 忠). For instance, the *Ming shi* records filial acts under the title and category of filial righteousness (*xiao yi* 孝義), while *juan* 177-183 classify loyal

[175] Ibid., 11: 143.

officials under the title and category of loyal righteousness (*zhong yi* 忠義).[176] Within this framework, "righteousness" can be broadly understood as an overarching principle encompassing actions that align with just and appropriate moral, ethical, and behavioral standards. Jin Bifeng's invocation of Princess Miaoshan's story, therefore, exemplifies the extent to which individuals may sacrifice their physical selves, even to the point of risking their lives, in the name of righteousness. Within the context of their conversation, this form of sacrifice not only surpasses that of individuals who merely relinquish material wealth but also underscores the prioritization of the moral and ethical realization of righteousness over personal preservation of one's life and physical body. In other words, righteousness names not a single virtue but a mode of ethical action that prioritizes moral obligation over personal interest.

This distinction is crucial when read against the silver-based economy of reward examined in the previous section. Whereas Madam Bai's story renders bodies commensurable through silver—pricing heads, bodies, and military service—the Buddhist story of Princess Miaoshan offers a counter-model in which bodily loss produces not equivalence but moral surplus. Eye-sacrifice here functions as a deliberate refusal of calculability. It marks a threshold beyond which value can no longer be translated into price. By incorporating the Buddhist narrative of Miaoshan into a Confucian moral framework, *Sanbao* reinterprets eye-sacrifice not only as an act of Buddhist devotion but also as an expression of filial piety and moral virtue. The eye, once a site of judgment, valuation, and political recognition, is transformed into the locus of uncompensated moral action. In doing so, the novel articulates a response to late-Ming anxieties over silver circulation and commodified perception: when value threatens to collapse into exchange, righteousness must be asserted through bodily acts that resist equivalence altogether.

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[176] *Ming shi*, 7575, 7407.

The motif of eye sacrifice reappears with particular force in Chapters 64–65 through the figure of Halihu, general and prince consort of the Kingdom of Golden Eyes. During a naval battle against the Ming forces, Halihu is struck in his left eye by an arrow. He responds with striking composure: “Two eyes are one too many; it is of little consequence to lose one” (兩隻眼本是多一隻，去了他也罷).[177] Without hesitation, he pulls out the arrow together with his golden eye, casts it onto the grass—where it disappears from sight—and immediately resumes command of the battle.

The episode unfolds not as a moment of individual bravado, but as a carefully framed moral exchange. Halihu’s brother-in-law, the Third Prince of the Kingdom of Golden Eyes, is overwhelmed by guilt—not only over Halihu’s injury, but also over the anxiety it will cause their father, the king of the Kingdom of Golden Eyes. Halihu then comforts him as follows,

> Halihu remarks, “What significance is there in the loss of a mere student’s eye, not worth mentioning at all! It is only our “father-king” (***fu wang***)’s concern that must be alleviated.”
> 哈里虎說道：「我學生之目，何足掛齒！只是父王之憂，須要與他一個寬解。」
>
> The Third Prince responds, “How can we possibly ease his concern?”
> 三太子道：「這憂愁怎麼與他寬解得？」
>
> ……
> Halihu answers, “……The southern soldiers, having shot out my eye today, may believe they have achieved victory, and thus the main camp will likely be filled with pride and celebration. When this joyous news reaches the water camp, they will surely lower their defenses.”
> 哈里虎道：「……南兵今日射出了我的眼珠兒，似覺得勝，旱寨裡不免洋洋得志，一場大歡喜。這個喜信傳到水寨裡，水寨裡面豈復提防。[178]

[177] Luo, *Sanbao*, 64: 826.
[178] Ibid., 64: 827.

The phrase *fu wang* 父王(father-king) is crucial here. It names the king simultaneously as sovereign and as father-in-law, thereby condensing Halihu's dual obligations as both subject and son-in-law. His bodily sacrifice thus acquires a doubled ethical charge: it signifies loyalty to the ruler and filial piety toward the paternal authority embodied in the same figure. The eye is relinquished not for tactical gain or reward, but to uphold a moral hierarchy in which personal injury is negligible when weighed against dynastic stability and familial duty.

This moral logic is further reinforced when Halihu proposes to turn his injury into a strategic ruse. He reasons that the Ming forces, believing his loss of an eye to signal victory, will lower their defenses, thereby creating an opportunity for counterattack. Here, bodily sacrifice is not only ethical but instrumental—yet crucially, it is never monetized. Its value lies precisely in its irreversibility. Halihu's later words make this ethical orientation explicit: "Though lacking in talent, I am honored to be connected to the royal family and to share in the fortunes and misfortunes of the state. I am willing to serve with utmost dedication, like a loyal dog or horse, and would face a thousand deaths without regret." (不才忝在戚畹，與國家休戚相關，願效犬馬之勞，萬死無恨！)[179] By binding his fate to that of the polity through marital affiliation, Halihu frames self-sacrifice as the highest expression of righteousness, echoing the earlier discussion of "acting righteously by giving away one's life."

The logic of sacrifice reaches its extreme conclusion in the aftermath of defeat. Following repeated losses to the Ming army, the Third Prince commits suicide. Halihu, despite being rescued by his soldiers on three occasions, ultimately succeeds in ending his own life by leaping into the sea after learning of his brother-in-law's death. These acts complete the ethical arc initiated by the loss of the eye: partial bodily sacrifice gives way to

[179] Ibid., 65: 835.

total renunciation of life in the name of loyalty and filial obligation. Significantly, these acts are recognized and praised by the Ming forces themselves. Commander Eunuch Sanbao remarks: “The Third Prince died as a filial son; Halihu died as a loyal subject. That a barbarian country should possess such figures of loyalty and filial piety puts us, the esteemed kingdom of China, to shame.” (三太子為子死孝，哈里虎為臣死忠。夷狄之國，有此忠孝之士，我們堂堂中國，倒反不如他)[180] This judgment produces a striking reversal. The so-called “barbarians,” marked by their golden eyes and foreign bodies, emerge as moral exemplars, while the Ming—elsewhere depicted as increasingly governed by calculation, reward, and self-interest—are implicitly critiqued.

The irony is sharpened by the symbolism of the golden eye itself. Although the “golden eyes” of this kingdom are not currency, they visually echo the language of value and wealth that pervades the novel’s material imagination. Yet Halihu’s actions decisively sever ocular symbolism from any logic of profit or preservation. In sacrificing his eye and ultimately his life, he refuses the very economy of exchange that dominates earlier episodes. The golden eye, rather than anchoring a “moneyed gaze,” becomes the site at which commodified perception is repudiated. Read alongside the case of Madam Bai, the Halihu episode thus completes a moral counterpoint. Where silver rewards translate bodies into price, eye sacrifice withdraws the body from calculation altogether. Through Halihu, *Sanbao* articulates an ethical horizon in which loyalty and filial piety demand losses that cannot be measured, compensated, or exchanged—an assertion of value that stands in direct opposition to the silver-based logic increasingly structuring the late-Ming world.

3.4 Conclusion

[180] Ibid., 67: 860.

As demonstrated in this chapter, the depiction of precious metals—such as gold, silver, and copper—often intertwined with representations of foreign bodily features, particularly the eyes in the Kingdoms of Golden Eyes and Silver Eyes, emerges as a nuanced and multifaceted symbol. The motif of metallic-colored eyes not only underscores the novelist's awareness of monetary value and the subordinate political positioning of foreign entities within a Sino-centric world order, but, as I argue, also gestures toward a moral critique. Through the act of ocular sacrifice, the narrative rejects a worldview governed by self-interest and material gain, instead affirming a commitment to righteous moral principles. Accordingly, material representations in *Sanbao* fulfill multiple symbolic functions—serving as markers of ethnic distinction, articulations of competing value systems, reflections of consumer culture, and embodiments of broader cultural and political hierarchies.

CHAPTER IV

ILLUSIONS OF A GOLDEN AGE: DIVINE PHOENIX EGGS AND VISIONS OF EXEMPLARY GHOSTS IN THE UNDERWORLD

There exists a longstanding tradition in Chinese political thought that links political turmoil with the appearance of omens, anomalies, supernatural illusions and visions—a tradition traceable to early canonical texts such as *The Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書), *The Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經), and *Zuo Commentary* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳), which further demonstrates that early Chinese political theory had begun to associate improper governance and the appointment of corrupt officials with the occurrence of natural disruptions such as solar and lunar eclipses.[181] In his influential work *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn* (*Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露), the Han dynasty philosopher Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE) articulates a cosmological framework in which natural phenomena are interpreted as Heaven's responses to moral conduct within the human realm.[182] As Cai Liang notes, Han scholars developed a theoretical framework that positions the emperor as the central mediator between human society and cosmic forces—an agent whose conduct and policy decisions are subject to constant evaluation by Heaven, often manifested through omens and natural calamities.[183] In this context, scholarship has suggested that linking abnormal phenomena and disasters to contemporary political conditions provided a mechanism through which

[181] Cai Liang, "The Hermeneutics of Omens: The Bankruptcy of Moral Cosmology in Western Han China (206 BCE–8 CE)," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 25, no. 3 (2015), 441–442. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186315000048. Also see Huang Zhaoji 黃肇基, *Handai Gongyangxue zaiyi lilun yanjiu* 漢代公羊學災異理論研究[*Studies of the Theory of Disasters in Han-Era Scholarship on "The Gongyang"*] (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe,1998), 67-69; Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注 [*The Annotated Zuo's Commentary to "The Chunqiu"*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 1288.
[182] Liang, "The Hermeneutics of Omens," 441.
[183] Ibid., 441–442.

critics could indirectly censure the emperor and his governance.[184] Building upon this interpretive tradition, I propose that the novelist of *Sanbao* similarly adopts the motif of anomalous visions, omens, and supernatural occurrences as a narrative strategy for articulating political critique. Through these symbolic representations, the novel engages in a veiled yet potent commentary on the state of contemporary Ming politics.

This chapter undertakes a close examination of two visionary and illusory episodes in *Sanbao*—the sighting of ghosts and the quest for phoenixes—and argues that the character Wang Ming is deliberately constructed as a narrative thread linking these episodes, both of which serve as vehicles for political critique. Through Wang Ming, the text articulates an aspirational longing for the idealized governance of the ancient sage kings. As Roel Sterckx notes, representations of sage kings in Warring States and Han dynasty writings variously portray the origins of Chinese civilization, often emphasizing moral and cultural—rather than biological—distinctions between humans and animals. These early texts suggest that the civilizing process was initiated by sage rulers who, for instance, taught human beings how to protect themselves from the wild—such as by nesting together—or instructed them in acts of cultural creation and moral cultivation. Foundational figures such as the Yellow Emperor, Yao, Shun, and Yu—celebrated for his legendary taming of the flood—were elevated as paragons of virtue and wisdom.[185] In Confucian thought, these legendary rulers came to embody the ideal of enlightened governance: sage kings who ruled not through coercion but through moral authority, guiding and civilizing the people by ethical example.

This chapter is organized into three sections. It begins by examining Wang Ming, a humble Ming soldier whose encounters with omens, anomalies, and supernatural visions position him as the central mediator of the novel's visionary experiences and a key vehicle

[184] Aihe Wang, *Cosmology and Political Culture in Early China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143–177.
[185] Roel Sterckx, *The Animal and the Daemon in Early China*. 1st ed (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 94-95, 123.

for its political critique. It then analyzes the Kingdom of Ghosts (*fengdu gui guo* 酆都鬼國) episode (Chapters 87–88) through a comparison with the *An Illustrated Book of Moral Exhortations and Warnings* (*Quanjie tushuo* 勸戒圖說), arguing that their contrasting representations of exemplary figures reinforce the novel's call for a morally disciplined ruler. Finally, it explores the recurring phoenix motif, particularly the image of the phoenix egg, as a symbol of sagely governance and political renewal. Together, these ghostly and mythical visions illuminate the novel's idealized political imagination and its aspiration to restore the Confucian moral order despite the uncertainty of its realization.

Overall, this chapter examines the motifs of supernatural visions and illusions such as ghosts and phoenixes, deliberately embedded within *Sanbao* to articulate the novelist's implicit socio-political critique and aspiration for the restoration of sage rule. Although the novelist appears to maintain a skeptical attitude toward the feasibility of realizing sage governance within the Ming dynasty itself, the depiction of distant foreign lands—particularly the imagined creation of fictional kingdoms—serves as a liberated and secure space for ideological exploration. These imagined geographies therefore offer the novelist an experimental realm in which to envision an idealized return to the golden age of ancient Chinese civilization.

4.1 Writing Political Critiques of the "Ming Emperor": Wang Ming's Journey through Omens, Anomalies, and Supernatural Visions

In the latter half of the novel, the Ming army relies heavily on two key figures: Huang Fengxian 黃鳳仙, a former general of the Kingdom of Women who betrays her homeland and marries a distinguished Ming general, and Wang Ming, a humble Ming soldier who will serve as the central protagonist of this section. Notably, although Wang Ming bears a name that symbolically resonates with the Ming dynasty, his ambiguous—or even negative—

conduct and representation, “Wang Ming” may also be interpreted as a pun on “Wang Ming” 亡明, literally meaning “the fall of the Ming.” This symbolic association complicates his narrative identity: despite bearing a name that evokes imperial authority, or even the emperor himself, Wang Ming’s name also admits a possible interpretation as “the fall of the Ming.” Moreover, he emerges from a lowly background and enters the narrative through deception—falsely claiming the ability to communicate with birds in order to secure an assignment from Jin Bifeng to retrieve phoenix eggs, as first seen in Chapter 52.

Furthermore, an additional layer of irony emerges in the interplay between Wang Ming’s name, his symbolic representation, and his primary magical weapon—the invisible grass—which grants him the ability to render himself unseen and thereby deceive foreign states into submission. The character *Ming* 明 may signify not only “the Ming dynasty” but also “light,” “brightness,” “clarity,” and “virtue.” In this light, the emblematic implication of Wang Ming’s invisibility may be read as the absence of brightness, clarity, and virtue—symbolically evoking a Ming dynasty in which such qualities are no longer present.

At the conclusion of his journey, Wang Ming, exhausted, chooses to rest within a temple dedicated to Guan Yu 關羽 (d. 220), a renowned military general who served under Liu Bei 劉備 (161–223) during the Three Kingdoms period. Celebrated for his unwavering loyalty, righteousness, and bravery, Guan Yu was posthumously deified and venerated as a sage, with his virtuous legacy perpetuated through generations of storytelling. He has since become a widely revered exemplar of moral integrity. While resting, Wang Ming enters into a dream in which he inadvertently overhears a conversation between the deified Guan Yu and his subordinate Zhou Cang 周倉—a character fictionalized in the 14th-century novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. In the dream, Guan Yu sternly declares, “Who dares defile my temple

with such impurity?" (是哪個在這裡穢污我的廟堂), to which Zhou Cang replies to Guan, describing Wang Ming as a "head-scratching, ill-omened sweeping star" (撓頭大掃星).[186]

The description of Wang Ming as a "head-scratching, ill-omened sweeping star" is both ambiguous and contentious. On the one hand, it implies that Wang Ming is a celestial being or reincarnated deity, thereby acknowledging his unusual status and potential influence. On the other hand, the appellation carries negative connotations, identifying him as an inauspicious force from the heavens. This duality complicates Wang Ming's characterization, particularly in light of his symbolic association with Ming authority. Although the deity Guan Yu ultimately chooses to enhance Wang Ming's capabilities upon discovering his possession of the "Invisibility Grass" (*yinshen cao* 隱身草)—a magical plant that grants invisibility—he nevertheless mocks Wang Ming's humble origins and lack of martial prowess, remarking that "his background is lowly, his strength is inadequate, and his swordsmanship unrefined." (*Zhi shi ta chushen weijian, luli bu jia, daofa bu shu* 只是他出身微賤，膂力不加，刀法不熟)[187] In response, Guan Yu commands his subordinate Zhou Cang to strike Wang Ming three times on each shoulder. Zhou Cang then places Guan Yu's divine blade in Wang Ming's hands and guides him through a series of practice swings. At the final stroke, however, Wang Ming is struck on the head, causing him to fall backward onto the temple's offering table and collapse to the ground.[188]

Upon awakening, it is revealed that the entire episode may have been nothing more than a dream—a classical "dream of the southern branch" (*nan ke yi meng* 南柯一夢). Significantly, despite the seemingly transformative nature of this visionary encounter, Wang Ming never subsequently demonstrates any martial prowess within the narrative. My

[186] Luo, *Sanbao*, 52: 676.
[187] Ibid., 52: 676.
[188] Ibid., 52:676-677.

invocation of "dream of the southern branch" thus serves as a symbolic device that highlights the ephemeral and illusory quality of his perceived empowerment, thereby reinforcing the text's broader thematic interrogation of the authenticity and instability surrounding the transmission and exercise of Ming authority.

Guan Yu's ambiguous remarks and demeanor may also resonate with the complex and morally ambivalent persona that Wang Ming embodies throughout the narrative. Ironically, it is Wang's initial act of deception that becomes the catalyst for his subsequent rise to prominence. Despite his humble origins and ethically questionable methods, Wang Ming ultimately emerges as one of the most consequential figures in the second half of the novel. By utilizing the treasures he acquires during his quest to locate the phoenix eggs—particularly the "Invisibility Grass"—, Wang Ming successfully orchestrates the submission of multiple foreign kingdoms through illusion and manipulation. [189]

In Chapter 78, for instance, Wang Ming boldly volunteers to employ his repertoire of magical techniques and illusionary arts—as he claims that was an ability that he had since youth—to secure the allegiance of any kingdom the Ming army may encounter. While this claim is presented with confidence, the narrative subtly implies that it may be another of Wang Ming's fabrications, as he never performs such feats without the assistance of either the Invisibility Grass or the magical interventions of Huang Fengxian, a former general of the Kingdom of Women. Nevertheless, the power he wields extends beyond mere visual deception; it functions on an epistemological level, shaping the cognition, ideological orientation, and political consciousness of others. As such, Wang Ming's manipulations play a decisive role in structuring the novel's evolving geopolitical landscape. This paradox between Wang Ming's symbolically resonant name—suggestive of imperial authority or even

[189] With the exception of the Kingdom of Zufar, other foreign states—such as the Guli Kingdom and the Kingdom of Hormuz—also submitted to the Ming army as a result of Wang Ming's deployment of illusions and his use of the Invisibility Grass.

the emperor himself—and his low social standing and deceitful conduct invites a deeper reflection on the nature of legitimacy, authority, and illusion within the text's broader framework of political critique. With great self-assurance, Wang Ming proclaims as follows:

> "Since my youth, I have mastered an array of illusionary arts of exceptional refinement. I can send dreams to individuals, produce auspicious signs through the flickering of lamp flames, and transmit messages through the cries of magpies. On a grand scale, I can impersonate deities and spirits; on a smaller scale, I can cause trees to bloom out of season. I can conjure monstrous serpents, pythons, and great birds such as roc and osprey, or summon favorable omens in the form of phoenixes, qilin, and wild geese. There is nothing I cannot do, and all my performances are executed with the utmost precision and wonder" (小的自幼時有個戲法兒，做得極妙，或是托夢於人，或是燈花報喜，或是喜鵲傳言。大則裝神做鬼，小則栽樹開花，怪則蛇蟒鵬鶚，順則風麟鴻雁，無所不能，無不精妙).[190]

Through such assertions, the narrative further underscores Wang Ming's adeptness in crafting illusions, dreams, omens, and spectacles—skills that become recurring and instrumental tools in the Ming army's imperial endeavors. At the same time, these episodes raise broader questions regarding the interplay of deception, perception, and ideological manipulation in the construction and maintenance of political authority. Wang Ming's involvement with supernatural sights and visions is thus rendered ambivalent; he occupies a dual role as both recipient and creator of dream-like illusions and prophetic imagery.

Owing to this "invisible power," Wang Ming is regularly deployed by the Ming army as an advance scout, responsible for reconnoitering newly encountered territories prior to the army's arrival. In this capacity, he emerges as the primary agent of visual engagement—both the first to observe and, through the use of Invisibility Grass, the one who controls what is revealed to others. His invisibility positions him as a mediator of sight and perception, one capable of shaping visual and epistemological realities even when these are grounded in

[190] Luo, *Sanbao*, 78: 1005.

deception. In other words, by wielding the powers granted by the Invisibility Grass, Wang Ming not only distorts visual perception but also manipulates the ideological frameworks of foreign polities, thereby influencing their political decisions and facilitating Ming expansion through illusion rather than direct military confrontation.

Wang Ming subsequently demonstrates the practical application of his illusory abilities with the aid of the Invisibility Grass in the Kingdom of Zufar (*zufa'er guo* 祖法兒國), located in the southern region of present-day Oman. In Chapter 78, the narrative describes how Wang Ming gathers intelligence about the kingdom and learns that the king is scheduled to make a temple visit. Utilizing the powers granted by the Invisibility Grass, Wang Ming vanishes instantaneously upon entering the temple and begins to manipulate the incense smoke. From the swirling vapor, he conjures the apparition of the Bodhisattva Guanyin, flanked on her left by a Dragon Maiden and on her right by a parrot. The Dragon Maiden performs graceful gestures, while the parrot flutters animatedly. Overwhelmed by reverence and awe, the foreign king hastens to the incense altar, where he repeatedly bows and prostrates himself, praying: "I am unworthy and incapable—how dare I trouble the great Bodhisattva to manifest through incense smoke?" (弟子無德無能，怎麼敢勞大菩薩結煙現化？)[191] The Dragon Maiden gestures once more, and the parrot again responds with a leap. The king continues to pray: "Since the Bodhisattva has manifested, should any event—be it auspicious or calamitous—befall my kingdom, may she reveal the karmic consequences clearly, for which I shall remain endlessly grateful."(既蒙菩薩現化，若是弟子國中有個甚麼事故，或吉或凶，當趨當避，總望菩薩明彰報應，弟子感謝無涯)[192] After three iterations of this choreographed illusion—featuring the gestures of the Dragon Maiden and

[191] Ibid., 78: 1007-1008.
[192] Ibid., 78: 1008.

the dancing of the parrot—Wang Ming, still cloaked in invisibility, assumes the voice of Guanyin. He instructs the king of Zufar to submit to the Ming forces upon their arrival and to prepare appropriate offerings and gestures of surrender. Following this episode, the king returns to his court and reflects on the miraculous vision. When he recounts the experience to his ministers, they urge him to take the divine revelation seriously. Convinced of the Bodhisattva's will, the king immediately orders the drafting of a formal letter of submission and a tribute petition, along with the preparation of a generous assortment of high-quality offerings to welcome the Ming delegation.[193]

This episode offers a compelling illustration of how Wang Ming manipulates visual perception to shape ideological consciousness and influence political decision-making. Although his methods are rooted in deception, Wang ultimately succeeds in compelling foreign rulers to surrender willingly. This dynamic presents an ironic parallel to the Confucian ideal of the sage king, who, according to classical political philosophy, governs through moral virtue and benevolent leadership, thereby inspiring voluntary allegiance among the people. The crucial distinction, however, lies in the means by which such submission is achieved: while the sage king is said to guide through ethical conduct and exemplary character, Wang relies on illusion and trickery. Thus, although both figures elicit voluntary submission, the mechanisms by which they do so are fundamentally different. The illusory visions orchestrated by Wang Ming may therefore serve as a critical commentary on the legitimacy of Ming imperial authority, subtly questioning the authenticity of its ideological foundations.

Similarly, before the Ming army's arrival at the Kingdom of Ghosts, Wang Ming is, as is customary, dispatched to survey the newly encountered domain. Upon entering the Kingdom

[193] Ibid., 78: 1006-1010.

of Ghosts, he encounters a woman across a river who bears a striking resemblance to his deceased wife. He soon discovers that she is indeed his late wife, who, following her death, was coerced by a ghostly judge into remarrying in the afterlife. As Wang Ming and his former wife exchange memories and share a moment of nostalgic reflection, the ghostly judge unexpectedly returns home. Demonstrating quick wit and presence of mind, the wife conceals Wang Ming's true identity by presenting him as her natal brother from the human world, introducing him to the judge, Cui.

This fabricated familial relationship prompts the judge to welcome Wang Ming warmly and offer him a guided tour of the underworld. Within this context, the fabricated kinship serves as a metaphorical analogue to the Invisibility Grass—functioning as a form of intangible disguise that allows Wang Ming to evade detection, even by supernatural authorities. It enables him to conceal his identity and navigate the intricate social and political dynamics of the underworld with impunity.

In the following section, I will examine not only Wang Ming's guided tour of the Kingdom of Ghosts—facilitated by his fictive "brother-in-law," Judge Cui—but also the various ghostly figures he encounters during his journey, many of whom are spectral representations of individuals renowned in Chinese history. I place this episode in comparative dialogue with *Quanjie tushuo*, a contemporary didactic work first published and reprinted during the Wanli reign. This analysis underscores the notable parallels between the two texts in their selection and portrayal of exemplary historical figures, highlighting their shared investment in moral didacticism and the implicit critique of contemporary sociopolitical conditions.

4.2 Reinventing Virtuous Exemplars as Ghosts: Critiquing Ming Emperors and Society through Dual-Layered Visions

While *Quanjie tushuo* presents these exemplars in human form, *Sanbao* reimagines them as ghosts, thereby introducing a distinctive narrative and ideological layer. The resemblance between the two works suggests an intertextual pattern in which certain paradigmatic moral actions are continuously constructed, adapted, and disseminated through print culture to reinforce and institutionalize Confucian ethical norms. Although both texts celebrate similar moral exemplars, *Sanbao*'s representation of these figures as contented inhabitants of the underworld who refuse to return to the human realm complicates their role within the moral discourse.

I argue, first, that this deliberate ghostly recasting of virtuous figures not only reaffirms traditional Confucian values but also positions *Sanbao* as a vehicle for both explicit and implicit political critique. This is particularly evident in the novel's incorporation of historical narratives surrounding Ming officials who were executed or committed suicide during the Jingnan Campaign (1399-1402), a dynastic conflict during which the Yongle Emperor usurped the throne from his nephew—into its construction of virtuous ghostly archetypes. Second, I examine the character of Wang Ming, a humble soldier whose name carries clear allusions to the Ming dynasty, focusing on his ability—or failure—to perceive and recognize these extraordinary spectral figures. Through the deliberate narrative inclusion of Ming loyalists and their posthumous representations, *Sanbao* advances a layered ideological critique: it affirms officials' loyalty to legitimate authority while simultaneously questioning the political legitimacy and moral consequences of the Yongle Emperor's usurpation during the Jingnan Campaign.

The Jingnan Campaign (1399–1402) was a civil war fought between the Jianwen Emperor and his uncle Zhu Di (1360–1424), who would later become the Yongle Emperor. The conflict originated from the Jianwen Emperor's policy to curtail the power of regional

princes in an effort to consolidate imperial authority. As several princes were stripped of their titles or neutralized, Zhu Di—then the Prince of Yan and among the most powerful of the imperial princes—perceived himself as the next likely target. Alarmed by the fate of his peers, Zhu Di mobilized his forces in open rebellion against his nephew. Ultimately, Zhu Di emerged victorious and entered the Ming capital of Nanjing, where he proclaimed himself emperor. Following his accession, he initiated a series of harsh reprisals against those who had remained loyal to the Jianwen regime. Not only were prominent officials subjected to brutal punishments, but many of their relatives and associates—regardless of guilt—were also executed, exiled, or imprisoned in a sweeping campaign of political retribution.[194]

To establish the foundational context for this analysis, it is essential to introduce the *Quanjie tushuo* and examine how its circulation may have repeatedly positioned certain individuals and deeds as virtuous exemplars. This process contributed to the construction and shaping of the content and behavioral paradigms associated with Confucian virtues, such as filial piety. The *Quanjie tushuo*, credited to the Ming official Zou Diguang 鄒迪光(1549–1625) during the Wanli period, was first published in 1589 and reprinted in 1594. As a prolific writer, Zou turned to literary production as a form of refuge amid the frustrations of his official career.[195] According to its preface, the work was written during Zou's time of official service.[196] This illustrated, straightforward, and accessible text features numerous historical figures whose exemplary deeds align with Confucian virtues from earlier dynasties,

[194] Hok-lam Chan, "The Chien-Wen, Yung-Lo, Hung-Hsi, and Hsüan-Te Reigns, 1399–1435," in *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 191-202.
[195] Ho Yi-Hsuan 何易璇, "Yugongli yu banzhuizhi —Zou Diguang *Yu gong gu cheng*" 愚公力與班倕智—鄒迪光《愚公谷乘》[Foolishness and Wisdom: the research of Zou Di-Guang's YuGong Valley Collection] (National Taiwan University, M.A. thesis, 2020), 12-14.
[196] Zou Diguang 鄒迪光, *Quanjie tushuo* 勸戒圖說, in *Zihai zhenben bian: Taiwan juan,*子海珍本編 臺灣卷, vol. 5 (Taipei: National Central Library; Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 2020), 111: 240.

yet it notably excludes Ming figures—a key distinction from the corresponding section in *Sanbao*, which innovatively includes Ming contemporaries.

Each entry in the *Quanjie tushuo* is titled to highlight a virtuous deed and is accompanied by an illustration emphasizing the associated moral behavior. Considering its intent, format, narrative style, and visual elements, the *Quanjie tushuo* was designed to educate and enlighten a broad audience, including individuals with limited literacy as well as women and children. Through its plain yet didactic style, the publication sought to promote Confucian values and moral conduct across diverse social groups.

The strong resemblance between the *Quanjie tushuo* and the ghostly virtuous figures in *Sanbao* aligns with a broader trend that scholar Noga Ganany identifies as "origin narratives"—a category of texts that share thematic, structural, and paratextual features characteristic of the vibrant book market of the Wanli period. Often functioning as vernacular hagiographies, these narratives recount the lives of deities, immortals, and revered historical figures, emphasizing the virtues and exemplary qualities that justify their elevated status. Such texts seek to construct idealized models of moral, religious, or social authority while employing *xiaoshuo*-style narrative techniques, often adopting the tone of a storyteller and utilizing the vernacular mode. Despite their fictionalized style, Ganany argues that their content and structure align more closely with hagiography or historiography than with conventional fiction.[197] Her observations regarding the genre of "origin narratives"—particularly their frequent engagement with the netherworld—resonate with my analysis of *Sanbao*, specifically Chapters 87–88, which recount Wang Ming's visit to the Kingdom of Ghosts. In this episode, he encounters numerous virtuous spirits whose lives are narrated

[197] Noga Ganany, "Journeys Through the Netherworld in Late-Ming Hagiographic Narratives," in *Late Imperial China* 42, no. 2 (2021): 137-178. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/late.2021.0008. See 138-142.

through the mouth of a ghostly judge. The details in these accounts can be traced to extant biographies in historical records.

Chapters 87–88 of *Sanbao* depict Wang Ming's exploratory journey and guided tour through the Kingdom of Ghosts, during which he visits the Palaces of the Ten Kings of Yama. On the left stands Reward Good Behaviors Platform (*shang shan xing tai* 賞善行臺), while on the right stands Punish Evil Behaviors Platform (*fa 'e xing tai* 罰惡行臺). These platforms are systematically divided into eight sections, each corresponding to one of the traditional Confucian virtues, such as filial piety (*xiao* 孝), loyalty (*zhong* 忠), and righteousness (*yi* 義).[198] The Reward Good Behaviors Platform is occupied by virtuous spirits who exemplified these moral values during their lifetimes, while the Punish Evil Behaviors Platform is reserved for those who transgressed or failed to uphold these principles. Among these figures, Wang Ming encounters a number of renowned filial sons, dutiful grandsons, and loyal officials from Chinese history—many of whom can be identified through extant biographical sources.

The first palace that Wang Ming visits is the Palace of Exemplary Filial Piety (*duxiao zhi fu* 篤孝之府), where he encounters five distinguished filial ghosts, some of whom are documented in existing historical records. Among these, four are also featured in the *Quanjie tushuo*. The sole exception is a Ming individual, as the *Quanjie tushuo* notably excludes figures from the Ming dynasty. The ghostly judge introduces the five filial sons and grandsons as follows:

> Each of these individuals exemplified filial piety, fulfilling their duties to their parents with utmost dedication. Let me briefly introduce a few for your

[198] The eight sections are separated into *xiao* 孝(filial piety), *ti* 弟(fraternal respect), *zhong* 忠(loyalty), *xin* 信 (faithfulness), *li* 禮 (propriety), *yi* 義 (righteousness), *lian* 廉 (integrity), and *chi* 恥(a sense of shame).

understanding:

This gentleman, surnamed Liu, with the given name Yin, devotedly cared for his grandmother. The heavens rewarded him with fifty measures of grain, and he attained the position of Grand Protector.

This gentleman, surnamed Yan, with the given name Zhen, cut flesh from his thigh to heal his father's illness. The heavens bestowed upon him Shun's Filial Piety Grass, which, when applied to the wound, immediately stopped the bleeding and alleviated the pain.

This gentleman, surnamed Gao, with the given name Shangda, at a young age, cut flesh from his thigh to cure his mother's illness and later served as Vice Censor-in-Chief.

This gentleman, surnamed Gu, with the given name Zhongli, was deeply devoted to his mother. After her passing, he observed mourning by living beside her grave for three years. The court commended him for his filial devotion, awarding him ten catties of gold.

Finally, this gentleman, surnamed Wang, with the given name Yan, showed extraordinary filial devotion to his stepmother and rose to the position of Left Minister of the Department of State Affairs.

列位都是事父母能竭其力，篤孝君子。我略說幾位你聽著：這一位姓劉，尊諱殷，孝養祖母，天雨粟五十鍾，官至太保；這一位姓嚴，尊諱震，割股療父，天賜舜孝草，塗所割處，即時血止痛除；這一位姓高，尊諱上達，未冠時割股愈母疾，官至右僉都御史；這一位姓顧，尊諱仲禮，事母至孝，母卒，廬墓三年，得朝廷旌表，賜金十斤；這一位姓王，尊諱延，事繼母至孝，官至尚書左丞相。[199]

As noted, among the five filial paradigms, aside from the novelist's creative incorporation of the Ming figure Gao Shangda, also known as Gao Ming 高明 (1422–1485), renowned for his filial devotion to his mother as recorded in extant historical records, the remaining four figures are similarly depicted in the *Quanjie tushuo*.[200] The life stories of two

[199] Luo, *Sanbao*, 87: 1129.
[200] Zhang, et al., *Ming shi*, 4349.

filial figures from the Jin dynasty, Liu Yin 劉殷 (d. 312) and Wang Yan 王延 (d. 318), are well-documented in historical texts such as the *Book of Jin* (*Jinshu*) for their acts of filial piety.[201] The other two figures, Yan Zhen 嚴震 and Gu Zhongli 顧仲禮, though limited in existing historical records, have their filial deeds preserved in the *Quanjie tushuo*. Yan Zhen is identified as a figure from the late-Yuan dynasty who "cut flesh from his thigh to heal his father's illness."[202] Meanwhile, Gu Zhongli, a figure from the Song dynasty, is described as having driven locusts away due to his filial piety, which was said to have moved the heavens. Following his mother's death, he resided by her grave for three years as a profound expression of mourning and devotion.[203]

These details closely parallel the ghostly judge's introduction of these figures in *Sanbao*, suggesting that Luo may have drawn upon the *Quanjie tushuo* in constructing his moral exemplars. The four figures represented in the Palace of Exemplary Filial Piety—Liu Yin, Yan Zhen, Gu Zhongli, and Wang Yan (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2)—correspond closely to the figures and stories preserved in the *Quanjie tushuo*. In that work, each biographical account is accompanied by a full-page illustration depicting the exemplary deed for which the figure is remembered. The protagonist's name is prominently displayed, enabling readers to identify the figure and connect the depicted scene with the virtue it represents. Through this close integration of image and biography, ethical ideals are rendered immediately visible and legible. *Sanbao* achieves a similar didactic effect through a different narrative strategy: rather than depicting exemplary conduct directly in illustrations, the novel allows Wang Ming to "see" these virtuous and upright ghostly figures during his journey through the underworld.

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201 Fang Xuanling 房玄齡, *Jin shu* 晉書(Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1980), 2287-2288, 2290.
202 Zou Diguang, *Quanjie tushuo*, 111: 288-289.
203 Ibid.,111:280-281.



Figure 4.1: Liu Yin 劉殷 and Gu Zhongli 顧仲禮, Illustration in *Quanjie tushuo* (From left to right).

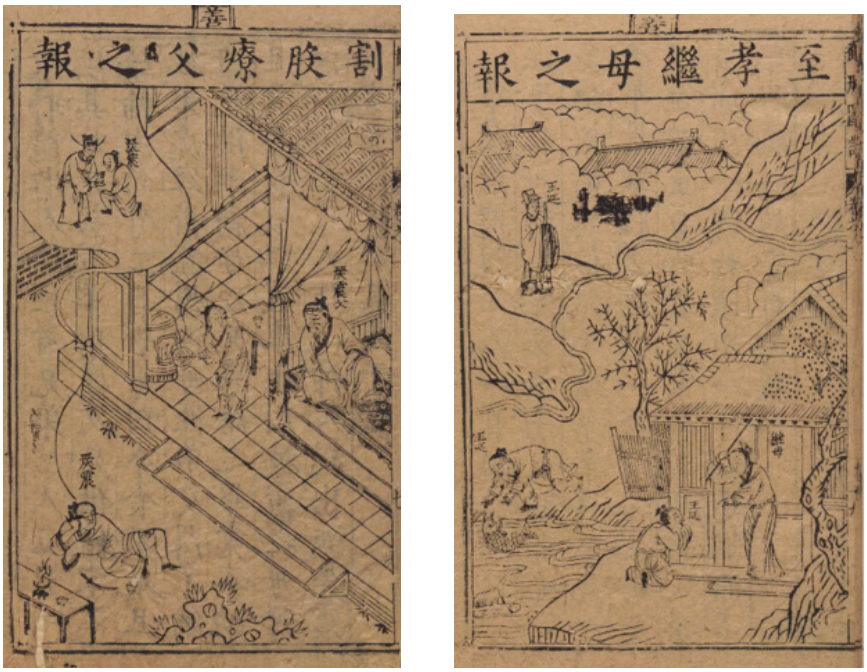


Figure 4.2: Yan Zhen 嚴震 and Wang Yan 王延, Illustration in *Quanjie tushuo* (From left to right).

Such textual correspondences, reinforced by the framing of their introduction within the narrative, point to the strong likelihood of Luo's reliance on this earlier moralizing work. Furthermore, in addition to these four exemplars, Wang Ming also encounters numerous other figures and learns of their associated virtuous deeds, as portrayed in the remaining

seven Palaces.[204] The depictions of these figures in *Sanbao* similarly demonstrate a close alignment with the content of the *Quanjie tushuo*. Since many of these figures fall outside the conventional canon, this notable recurrence and striking overlap between the two texts suggest processes of repetition, adaptation, and reinforcement in the transmission of Confucian paradigms through late-Ming print culture and book circulation. This, in turn, highlights *Sanbao's* engagement with contemporary discourses on Confucian virtues and reveals how paradigms of moral exemplarity were constructed, disseminated, and at times directly replicated.

However, despite these similarities, the contrasting representations—human versus ghost—demonstrate strikingly different interpretations, revealing the divergent intentions of the two authors. In the *Quanjie tushuo*, the virtuous paradigms of living individuals are intended to instruct and encourage others to emulate virtuous deeds, with the implication that virtuous behaviors will lead to praise, reward, and lasting esteem. In contrast, in *Sanbao*, despite the repetition of the same figures and virtuous deeds, these individuals are portrayed as ghosts who, even in death, "refuse to return to the human world" due to the absence of wise rulers.

In Chapter 87, when Wang Ming learns of the lives of these revered ghosts, he is perplexed as to why these noble figures have not returned to the earth. The ghostly judge offers a thought-provoking explanation: "Those who stay in the Reward Good Behaviors Platform possess an upright *qi*. Their possession of this *qi* is endless. When they meet an enlightened ruler who brings order to the world, they will be reborn as political or military leaders—such as kings, feudal lords, generals, or prime ministers—enjoying honor and a

[204] Representative examples of figures appearing in both *Sanbao* and the *Quanjie tushuo* include Wu Dazhi 吳達之(sixth palace in *Sanbao*), Jiang Heng 姜肱(second palace), Zheng Jun 鄭均(second palace), Lu Cao 盧操(second palace), Zhou Si 周司(second palace), and Deng Shutong 鄧叔通(fourth palace), among others. See Luo, *Sanbao*, 88: 1129-1134; and Zou Diguang, *Quanjie tushuo*, 111: 327, 331, 339, 347, 323, 335.

good name for posterity; however, if there is no enlightened ruler who brings order to the world, they will remain in the netherworld to live in comfort and ease" (這些賞善行台裏面的人，都得天地之正氣，無了無休，每遇明君治世，則生為王侯將相，流芳百世。不遇明君治世，則安享陰哩受天福).[205] This narrative implicitly conveys a pointed political critique: the current emperor, by failing to attract these virtuous spirits back to the human world, may not be a truly enlightened or virtuous ruler. The ghostly judge's explanation thus functions not only as cosmological reasoning but also as a subtle indictment of contemporary imperial leadership, suggesting a lack of moral authority sufficient to summon the return of righteous governance.

This scenario presents a profound irony: these ghosts of revered moral exemplars, who are celebrated and able to enjoy posthumous comforts and respect in the Reward Good Behaviors Platform due to their Confucian virtues, ironically refuse to return to the human world to sacrifice themselves again for filial piety or loyalty to their rulers. The author's political satire is evident in this conversation, as the judge implies that the current emperor may lack the wisdom necessary to attract these esteemed ghosts back to earth. A previous passage in the novel resonates with this theme: "It was not until recently that there were few good people in the world, but not that many. Otherwise, there are only disorderly officials and thieves who are disloyal and unfilial. The world will continue to become even worse." (到如今世界上才有好人，只是少些。不然卻都是些亂臣賊子，不忠不孝，愈加不成個世界)[206] Through this commentary, the author underscores the irony of a society where even the most virtuous figures are unable to fulfill their potential due to the absence of an enlightened ruler.

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[205] Luo, *Sanbao*, 87: 1129. This intertextuality can be seen in chapter 12 of *Zhouzao ji* 咒棗記, written by Ming contemporary literati Deng Zhimo 鄧志謨(1560—?), published in 1603 shortly after *Sanbao* was published. See discussion on the intertextuality in chapter 5.
[206] Ibid., 44: 569.

It is also ironic that these renowned filial sons and loyal officials from Chinese history appear in such a "marginal area." In the eyes of orthodox Chinese literati and scholars, the so-called "western seas countries" were considered culturally and geographically peripheral compared to the central Ming territories. These filial sons and loyal officials become doubly marginalized as they live peacefully and comfortably in the Kingdom of Ghosts, rather than within the Ming dynasty, thus embodying a second layer of marginalization as ghosts rather than living humans.

A further reinforcement—both implicit and explicit—of political critique and moral messaging can be discerned through the novelist's incorporation of historical Ming figures, particularly in his innovative portrayal of officials who either perished or chose to end their lives during the Jingnan Campaign. A compelling example of this narrative strategy is found in the depiction of the third palace, the Palace of Loyalty and Integrity (*zhongjie zhi fu* 忠節之府). In this episode, the ghostly judge introduces Wang Ming to three exemplary officials from the Ming dynasty. Although their biographies are not fully recounted, Wang Ming is able to recognize them, and the narrative offers subtle cues that allow the reader to identify these "loyal ghosts" as officials who embraced death rather than capitulation during the Jingnan upheaval. Through this narrative strategy, the novelist constructs a multilayered political critique and a poignant moral reflection on loyalty and martyrdom.

> The judge remarked, "These individuals are all loyal ministers and martyrs who sacrificed their personal lives for the nation. Allow me to briefly introduce a few of them to you. This gentleman's surname is Yu, and his honorable given name is Que."
>
> Wang Ming responded, "Brother-in-law, there's no need to introduce these lords. I recognize quite a number of them."

The judge inquired, “Which ones do you recognize?”

Wang Ming replied, “This one here is Master Fang Zhengxue; that one is Zhou Xiuzhuan; and the other is Chen Jingxian. Altogether, there are twenty-three lords in this group, and I recognize them all.”

The judge said, “Regardless of whether you are closely acquainted with them, they are still your fellow townsmen. Why not take the opportunity to visit them for a while?”

判官道：「這列位都是為國忘家忠臣烈士，我略說幾位你聽著；這一位姓余，尊諱闕。」王明道：「姐夫，快不要講這幾位老爺，我認得好些。」判官道：「你認得哪幾位？」王明道：「這邊是方正學老爺，這邊的周修撰老爺，這邊是陳靖獻老爺。共一班二十三位老爺，我都是認得的。」判官道：「親不親，故鄉人。你去探訪他們一番，有何不可?」[207]

Although detailed biographical information about these individuals is not provided in *Sanbao*’s chapters, the ghostly judge’s remark that “they are still your fellow townsmen” reinforces the identification of the three figures recognized by Wang as Ming officials. Among the four loyal officials introduced by the ghostly judge, the three figures identified by Wang Ming—Fang Zhengxue, Zhou Xiuzhuan, and Chen Jingxian—are officials who either sacrificed their lives or chose to commit suicide during the Jingnan Campaign and thus came to embody the virtues of loyalty and resistance in the face of political turmoil. The sole exception, Yu Que 余闕(1303–1358), a late-Yuan official who committed suicide when Chen Youliang 陳友諒(1320–1363) captured his city, similarly exemplifies unwavering loyalty in the face of political upheaval. As a powerful rebel leader during the Yuan–Ming transition and a principal rival of the future Hongwu emperor, Chen posed a direct challenge

[207] Ibid., 88: 1131.

to the Yuan regime. Yu Que's refusal to surrender and subsequent suicide therefore became a commemorated example of fidelity to a collapsing dynasty.

I will further explore the traumatic life stories of these three Ming officials to underscore the ideological significance behind the novelist's choice of characters and their elevation into the "Palace of Loyalty and Integrity." By examining their lives and decisions during times of political turmoil, the narrative not only illustrates how these officials upheld loyalty, even at the cost of their own lives, but also seems to function as a statement of the novelist's perspective on the contested issues of political legitimacy and authority during the early years of the Ming dynasty. The first individual, Fang Zhengxue, is identified as Fang Xiaoru 方孝孺(1357–1402), and is also referred to by his honorific title, Master Zhengxue 正學先生. Fang Xiaoru was a distinguished scholar and high-ranking official who served under the Jianwen Emperor (r. 1398–1402). Renowned as the spiritual leader of scholars during his time, Fang Xiaoru was highly respected for his integrity and intellectual influence. Following the Yongle Emperor's usurpation of the throne from his nephew, Fang Xiaoru was ordered to draft the imperial accession edict to legitimize the Yongle Emperor's rule. Because Fang refused, the Yongle Emperor retaliated with extreme measures, ordering the execution of Fang's relatives, children, and associates in his presence. According to historical accounts, the Yongle Emperor implemented an unprecedented punishment, extending the execution to the "tenth degree" 誅十族, which further included Fang's friends and disciples.[208]

The second figure, Zhou Xiuzhuan, refers to Zhou Shixiu 周是修 (1354–1402), a Ming official who served as an Compiler in the Hanlin Academy (*Hanlin zuanxiu* 翰林纂修), during the reign of the Jianwen Emperor. Following the Yongle Emperor's seizure of the

[208] IHP, *Ming Shilu*, 59-60, 1090. Also see Zhang, *Ming shi*, 4017-4020.

capital, Zhou Shixiu composed a suicide letter addressed to his friends and subsequently ended his life by hanging himself in Zunjing pavilion (*Zunjing ge* 尊經閣) of theYingtianfu Academy (*Yingtianfu fuxue* 應天府府學), an official educational institution.[209] The choice of this location for his death was highly symbolic, underscoring his moral integrity and unwavering loyalty as a scholar.

The third figure, Chen Jingxian, occasionally misrecorded in later reprinted editions of *Sanbao* as Qingxian,[210] refers to Chen Di 陳迪 (?–1402), who was posthumously granted the honorific title Jingxian 靖獻, a designation signifying an official's utmost loyalty to the ruler. Chen Di served as Minister of Rites (*Libu Shangshu* 禮部尚書) during the reign of the Jianwen Emperor. During the *Jingnan Campaign*, both Chen Di and his sons were subjected to the severe punishment of dismemberment (*zhe* 磔) in a public marketplace.[211]

The lack of detail surrounding these three ghosts distinguishes them from the other spectral figures that Wang Ming encounters. Unlike the virtuous ghosts introduced by the judge in narratives showing how they embody specific Confucian virtues, these three Ming officials are identified solely by their names and official titles, with no further elaboration. This omission serves as a subtle clue, reinforcing Wang Ming's encounter with the ghosts of loyal officials who perished during the Jingnan Campaign.

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[209] Zhang, *Ming shi*, 4049-4050.

[210] Some Wanli-reprinted editions, such as that published by the Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社 [Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House], mistakenly render the name as "Chen Qingxian"陳清獻. Examination of the digital facsimile of the Wanli edition preserved in the National Archives of Japan confirms that the correct form is "Chen Jingxian"陳靖獻. See Luo, *Sanbao*, 88:1131; see also Luo, Wanli digital edition, vol. 18, 88:32, National Archives of Japan Digital Archive, accessed September 23, 2025, https://www.digital.archives.go.jp/DAS/meta/listPhoto?LANG=default&BID=F1000000000000107637&ID=M2016092012012859859&TYPE=

[211] Zhang, *Ming shi*, 4025-4026; Shi Runzhang 施閏章, *Xue yu tang wen ji* 學餘堂文集*: [28 juan, shi ji 50 juan, wai ji 2 juan]* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1987), 1313-398.

Historically, although these officials who remained faithful to the Jianwen Emperor began to be recognized as "loyal officials" within the Ming court during the Wanli period, the sparse narration of their lives in the novel can be understood as a subtle critique of the Jingnan Campaign.[212] The suggestive portrayal invites readers to identify the figures and their historical significance, particularly those familiar with the political trauma of the dynasty's early years. Such readers would likely recognize these "Ming ghosts" and the tragedies associated with them, even without detailed elaboration. This approach not only avoids direct confrontation with contemporary political sensitivities but also allows informed readers to grasp the underlying commentary on loyalty, legitimacy, and the contentious early Ming political transitions.

From another perspective, the representation of extraordinary human virtues in spectral rather than human form may be interpreted through two metaphorical layers of "vision," each functioning as a critique of the contemporary Ming rulers. The first layer emerges through the motif of "seeing ghosts with ordinary human eyes." The visibility of these revered figures to Wang Ming suggests their deliberate choice to remain in the Kingdom of Ghosts rather than return to a living world marred by political corruption. Their spectral existence thus symbolizes a refusal to uphold unquestioning loyalty or filial piety in service of a morally compromised regime. This vision of "seeing ghosts," then, becomes a vehicle for political satire, implying that the reigning emperor lacks the virtue and moral authority necessary to summon these exemplary figures back into the realm of the living.

A second metaphorical layer builds upon this act of "seeing ghosts" and centers on the paradox of *seeing* yet failing to truly *recognize*, invoking the concepts of *zhi* 知 and *shi* 識, both of which denote the ability to discern or recognize the value and virtue of individuals.

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[212] Zhang, *Ming shi*, 3731, 4020, 4395, 4918.

While Wang Ming recognizes the Ming officials who perished during the Jingnan Campaign, he fails to recognize the filial spirits in the Palace of Exemplary Filial Piety, whom the ghostly judge had introduced earlier. Their exchange underscores the ontological divide between the living and the dead, as one ghost politely notes, "Although we are both from the Ming Dynasty, we are separated by the underworld" (我們同是大明國，但有幽冥之隔耳). Wang Ming responds, "My ordinary eyes cannot *recognize* these extraordinary old men" (在下肉眼不識列位老先生).[213] Although Wang attributes his inability to recognize them to the limitations of his "ordinary eyes," the paradox lies in the fact that he is able to see them—despite their ghostly status—yet remains ignorant of their identities and moral significance.

This visual recognition, therefore, belies a deeper failure of discernment. On the surface, Wang's admission may appear to signal mere unfamiliarity with their identities; however, at a metaphorical level, it reveals a more profound incapacity to recognize the virtuous legacies of these ghostly figures. Given Wang Ming's symbolic alignment with the Ming emperor or the imperial court, his failure to "recognize" these exemplary ghosts may be read as an allegorical critique of imperial governance—specifically, the emperor's own lack of discernment and his inability to acknowledge and appreciate the virtue and loyalty of truly meritorious officials. Thus, the episode functions not only as a supernatural encounter but also as a moral indictment of the Ming court's declining moral virtue.

As the Ming army travels between earth and the underworld, Wang Ming's "ordinary eye" sees and meets people who transcend historical time and space, blurring distinctions between ghosts and humans, the dead and the living at this world's edge. The author's method of recording and introducing these ghostly historical figures is similar to his engagement with the *Zizhi tongjian*. As previously argued in Chapter 2, the author of *Sanbao*

[213] Luo, *Sanbao*, 87: 1129.

may have intended to present the work as an alternative form of historical writing, one that parallels the *Zizhi tongjian* not only in its inclusion of biographical sketches of historical figures but also in its didactic purpose—to offer guidance for more virtuous and effective governance. These ghostly figures, though rendered in a spectral form that should be imperceptible to ordinary human eyes, are nevertheless revealed to Wang Ming, giving concrete form to ideals of loyalty, filiality, and political integrity. At the same time, their spectral presence provides the novelist with a vehicle through which political critique can be articulated under the guise of moral exemplarity.

4.3 The Vision of the Sage King: Phoenix Eggs in the Distant Western Seas

This section explores Wang Ming's quest for the phoenix eggs, paying particular attention to the recurring motif of the phoenix and its eggs throughout the latter half of the novel. As a sacred and auspicious creature, the phoenix occupies a significant place in the tradition of Chinese political thought—especially within the Confucian Classics, where its appearance is interpreted as an omen of the emergence of a sage ruler and the restoration of righteous governance characteristic of a golden age. While the novel engages with this symbolic tradition, it simultaneously introduces a paradox: the phoenix itself remains elusive—its manifestation mainly confined to distant, foreign realms—whereas its eggs appear repeatedly and assume a central narrative role. This juxtaposition invites closer analysis of the text's political imagination, revealing the novelist's idealized vision of a utopian social order rooted in the moral and philosophical ideals associated with China's antiquity.

The phoenix is a legendary and sacred creature with a long-standing presence in both Asian and Western cultural traditions. As Roel Sterckx observes, the interrelationship between the human and animal realms was considered instrumental in enabling a sage ruler to

assert moral dominance over the natural world. The same ethical principles that transformed human beings into civilized agents were believed to extend their influence to the animal kingdom. Thus, the domestication of animals and the assertion of human governance over the natural world were conceptualized not as acts of physical conquest but as processes of moral transformation.[214] Within the traditional Confucian context, the appearance of the phoenix carries a profound symbolic significance, signifying the emergence of a sage ruler whose governance inaugurates an era of harmony and prosperity. This association is notably expressed in the Confucian *Analects*, where Confucius laments: "The phoenix does not appear; the river issues no chart. It is all over with me, is it not?" (鳳鳥不至，河不出圖，吾已矣夫)[215] This passage was later annotated by Kong Anguo 孔安國 (ca. 156–ca. 74 BCE), a prominent Confucian scholar of the Western Han dynasty, who explained that "when a sage receives the mandate [to rule], the phoenix will appear and the Yellow River will produce a chart." (聖人受命，則鳳鳥至，河出圖)[216] In other words, the phoenix's appearance was believed to coincide with periods of exemplary moral order and enlightened rule, serving as an emblematic sign of sage kingship and the ideal governance associated with antiquity.

Luo Maodeng makes use of this symbolism in *Sanbao* to link the appearance of the phoenix with the presence of a sage ruler. In Chapter 76, a foreign Buddhist monk defending the Kingdom of Mogadishu 木骨都束國 (the present-day capital of Somalia on the East African coast) conjures a "magical bird" from a gourd, which emerges singing and dancing, prompting thousands of other birds to gather and pay homage. These birds then follow the commands of this "magical bird" and engage in combat against Jin Bifeng's enchanted weapon. In response, Jin Bifeng and his disciple Yungu 雲谷 (literally "Cloud Valley")

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[214] Sterckx, *The Animal and the Daemon in Early China*, 123.
[215] Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*. Translated by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 61, 9.9.
[216] Ibid., 61. See note 4.

engage in a dialogue about the nature of the bird, speculating that it may be a phoenix conjured by the foreign monk. Jin Bifeng remarks, “A phoenix is the king of all birds; therefore, these exotic and extraordinary birds gather to worship it.” (一個鳳凰卻不是百鳥之王？故此有這些奇禽異鳥前來朝拜)[217] This statement reinforces the phoenix’s symbolic status as the “king of birds,” a designation that can be extrapolated to suggest a corresponding political order within the human realm—one in which a sage ruler, like the phoenix, commands reverence and obedience from all under heaven.

Subsequently, Yungu draws upon references from the Confucian Classics to further reinforce the connection between the phoenix and the rule of ancient sage kings. He asks, “Is this the bird that appeared during Emperor Shun’s reign and sang on Mount Qi during King Wen’s time?” (舜時來儀，文王時鳴於岐山，可就是他麼), to which Jin Bifeng replies, “Exactly. The phoenix is a divine bird; its appearance signifies an era of great peace and stability.” (正是他。鳳凰靈鳥，見則天下大安寧)[218] This exchange explicitly recalls the reigns of two revered sage kings—Emperor Shun and King Wen—suggesting that the appearance of the phoenix during their rule served as a signifier of an ideal political era marked by wisdom and virtue. The invocation of these classical exemplars thus reinforces the phoenix’s traditional role as a harbinger of moral governance and sociopolitical harmony.

Following the conversation, a poem describing the phoenix is introduced, further reinforcing its traditional role as an auspicious symbol of a virtuous and enlightened rule under a sage king. This poem not only confirms the identity of this magic bird as phoenix but further emphasizes the strong symbolic association in the novel between the appearance of the phoenix and the idealized rule of a sage king.

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[217] Luo, *Sanbao*, 76: 981.
[218] Ibid., 76: 981.

The phoenix gathers upon the southern heights of Mount Yue, lingering near the solitary roots of the bamboo.
Its heart remains unwavering and inexhaustible, as it soars on outstretched wings through the purple haze.
Does it not often endure hardship, disdaining an association with the flock of common birds?
When, then, will it descend in auspicious presence? Only under the rule of a sage sovereign endowed with profound wisdom.

鳳凰集南岳，徘徊孤竹根。

此心存不厭，奮翅騰紫氛。

豈不常辛苦，羞與雀同群。

何時當來儀？要須聖明君。[219]

Subsequently, in order to subdue the powerful and divine mythical bird, Jin Bifeng utilizes one of the two phoenix eggs previously discovered in Chapter 52 by Wang Ming. As Jin Bifeng holds the egg in his hand and gently raises it toward the daylight, the phoenix summoned by the foreign Buddhist monk flies directly into the egg.[220] This act not only neutralizes the supernatural force unleashed by the enemy, but also marks the first visual manifestation of the divine phoenix within the narrative. Although this phoenix is initially summoned by a foreign monk and appears in the context of the western seas, it is ultimately, at least symbolically, brought under the control of Ming representatives—suggesting a reassertion of Ming political authority over foreign powers.

The motif of the two phoenix eggs functions as a symbolic thread woven throughout the second half of the novel. Unlike many Ming dynasty fictional works that feature sacred animals such as the phoenix, qilin, or white deer—typically depicted in their mature,

[219] Ibid., 76: 981.
[220] Ibid., 76: 981.

auspicious forms as signs of sage rulership or evoked through poetic allusion—*Sanbao* uniquely foregrounds the image of unhatched phoenix eggs.[221] This distinction invites a deeper allegorical reading. This section contends that the phoenix eggs encapsulate a complex tension between the novelist's idealized vision of sage-kingship, rooted in classical Chinese political philosophy, and an underlying skepticism regarding the feasibility of actualizing such ideals within the sociopolitical conditions of the Ming dynasty. Crucially, Wang Ming—whose name symbolically evokes the Ming imperial order—is entrusted with the mission of locating and transporting these unhatched eggs. In fulfilling this role, Wang emerges as a pivotal figure through whom the narrative explores the disjunction between utopian political aspiration and historical reality.

As Wang Ming embarks on a journey to Phoenix Mountain (*fenghuang shan* 鳳凰山) in search of both a male and a female phoenix egg, he does not encounter the mythical birds themselves. Instead, he discovers a peculiar tree bearing a nest, which he initially suspects may belong to a phoenix. Upon closer examination, he finds neither phoenix nor eggs; instead, he comes across a magical herb known as "Invisibility Grass."[222] As mentioned, this extraordinary herb later enables him to deceive foreign states by granting him the supernatural ability to become invisible. While utilizing the powers of the Invisibility Grass, Wang Ming encounters a woodcutter who, unable to see him and thus mistaking him for an immortal, offers to guide him to the true location of the phoenix nest. With the woodcutter's assistance, Wang Ming ultimately succeeds in acquiring two phoenix eggs, though he

[221] Unlike *Sanbao*, which primarily depicts the phoenix in the form of unhatched phoenix eggs, the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* presents the phoenix in its mature form in several chapters—such as Chapters 9, 79, 80, and 98—appearing either in poetic references or as an auspicious symbol associated with a virtuous ruler. Luo Guanzhong, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms = San Kuo Chih Yen-I* (Taipei: Sanmin chubanshe, 1989), 55, 495-496, 619.
[222] Luo, *Sanbao*, 52: 670-671.

deceives the man by falsely promising to reward him the following day with an elixir of longevity.[223]

Furthermore, it is worth noting that Wang Ming is chosen for the mission solely because he falsely claims to possess the ability to "communicate with birds"—a fabricated talent that can be read allegorically as the capacity to engage with foreigners, an ability carrying symbolic weight in traditional Sino-centric political and literary discourse, which often likens foreigners to "birds and beasts."[224] This deception, however, grants him the opportunity to pursue the phoenix eggs, the emblem of the possibility of sage kingship. Upon returning to the Ming army after his search for the phoenix eggs, he even attempts to deceive Jin Bifeng regarding both the circumstances of his journey and the discovery of the magical artifact. Although he never directly encounters the legendary creature, the guidance of the woodcutter ultimately leads him to a trace of its presence—two luminous phoenix eggs—which may be read as a symbolic glimmer of hope for the restoration or emergence of enlightened rule. Taken together, this episode functions as a broader allegory through which the novelist reflects on the Ming dynasty's construction of a hierarchical Sino-foreign or sociopolitical order—one based not solely on military might, but increasingly on calculated illusion, strategic diplomacy, and ideological manipulation. However, while this goal may be achieved within the narrative, it is realized through a process fraught with moral compromise and pervasive deception, thereby casting doubt on the legitimacy and ethical foundations of the authority it seeks to affirm.

This, however, does not mark the end of the narrative surrounding the two phoenix eggs discovered by Wang Ming in *Sanbao*. In Chapter 59, following the Ming army's defeat of the Safa Kingdom 撒發國, Jin Bifeng foresees a severe three-year calamity that will befall the

[223] Ibid., 52: 668-675.
[224] Li, "Cultural Identity and Cultural Difference in *Zuozhuan*," 22–23.

kingdom. In order to shield its inhabitants, Jin Bifeng uses one of the phoenix eggs to incorporate the entirety of the Safa Kingdom—its people, animals, plants, and landscape—into the protective sphere of the egg. He even explains that the longer they remain inside, the more divine blessings they will receive.[225]

The phoenix egg reappears in Chapters 94 and 95, once again invoking imagery associated with a Confucian political utopia. After being preserved within the phoenix egg for several years, the Safa Kingdom is revealed to have achieved even greater prosperity. In Chapter 94, the narrative describes how Jin Bifeng summons a pair of phoenixes from the two eggs. These phoenixes emerge gracefully and ascend to the heavens, while Jin Bifeng simultaneously releases the Safa Kingdom from the protective enclosure of the egg. Intrigued by the transformation, some members of the Ming army, including the Eunuch Sanbao, express curiosity about the current state of the Safa Kingdom. In response, Jin Bifeng draws a cross on these Ming soldiers' eyes, causing them to fall into a trance-like sleep. [226]

In this visionary state, they awaken to find themselves within the Safa Kingdom, where they can still see the city walls, the palace, the people, and even the former battlefield. According to Eunuch Sanbao's account, he engages in conversation with two elderly men playing chess, from whom he learns: "It is somewhat chaotic, yet the lives of fishermen, woodcutters, farmers, and herdsmen remain as they once were. People live their days peacefully. What is more remarkable is that in the past three to five years, not a single person has died or fallen ill—just like the old times." (只是混沌些！漁樵耕牧，卻比舊時一同，日子倒是過得。卻又有件好處，三五年間，沒有半個人死，沒有半個人害病，這個又好似舊時)[227] This scene and its accompanying dialogue affirm the Safa Kingdom's state of prosperity and tranquility following its release from the phoenix egg. Particularly noteworthy

[225] Luo, *Sanbao*, 59: 758-759.
[226] Ibid., 94: 1214-1216.
[227] Ibid., 94: 1217.

is the imagery of two elderly men at leisure, engaged in a game of chess. The depiction of the elderly engaging in such serene pastimes serves as an emblematic representation of a harmonious and well-ordered society, untroubled by war, famine, or other forms of social disruption. The men's reference to "the old times" further amplifies this portrayal, evoking the idealized memory of a golden age characterized by sage rule.

The motif of the phoenix eggs is directly connected to the Safa Kingdom's formidable defense against the Ming army. In the second half of the novel, the Safa Kingdom becomes the first polity to decisively repel Ming forces, aided by its national master and four Daoist immortals, all of whom descend from the heavens. Because their immortal supervisor has been reincarnated in the human realm, they seize the opportunity to obtain the magical treasure and use its supernatural powers to resist the Ming army. In response to this opposition, Jin Bifeng dispatches Wang Ming to procure the phoenix eggs while simultaneously petitioning the Jade Emperor for assistance. The Safa Kingdom thus serves both as the catalyst for the Ming army's quest to locate the phoenix eggs and as the eventual beneficiary of their protective power. This dynamic is paradoxical: on the one hand, it illustrates the magnanimity of the Ming army—particularly the spiritual leadership of Jin Bifeng—despite the kingdom's fierce resistance; on the other hand, it is deeply ironic that the utopian vision is not realized within Ming territory but is instead displaced to a distant, fictional realm.

This episode draws renewed the reader's attention to the utopian ideals embedded in Confucian political philosophy, reinforcing the symbolic function of the phoenix egg as a vessel of moral preservation and benevolent protection. In doing so, the narrative reaffirms its investment in the ideological and philosophical aspirations associated with the governance of a sage king. However, this idealized political vision is notably not realized within the Ming empire itself but is instead experienced by the Ming army in a dreamlike state within the

confines of the Safa Kingdom—a distant, foreign, and ultimately fictionalized realm. In this context, the narrative may be interpreted as suggesting that, although a Confucian utopia can be conceptually preserved and symbolically projected, its actual realization remains uncertain—either relegated to the realm of dreams or displaced from the historical and geographical realities of the Ming polity.

Other members of the Ming entourage encounter and observe "four types of figures and scenery" 四樣人物 and "two groups of people" 兩班人物, though they are initially unable to decipher their significance. It is only after Celestial Master Zhang offers an interpretation of these visions that they come to understand that the scenes, objects, and individuals encountered within the Safa Kingdom function as symbolic representations of an idealized polity—one in which "the elderly are cared for in their final years, the young are nurtured, farmers have surplus grain, and women have surplus cloth; henceforth, winds are favorable and rains timely; thereafter, the country flourishes and the people live in peace." (老有所終，幼有所養，農有餘粟，女有餘布，從此以前，風調雨順；從此以後，國泰民安)[228] This vision aligns with the auspicious symbolism of the phoenix—a divine creature traditionally emblematic of harmony, prosperity, and virtuous governance under the rule of a sage king. Through this portrayal, the narrative not only reinforces Confucian ideals but also gestures toward an alternative political imaginary—one that prioritizes moral cultivation and protective governance over military conquest, and envisions a return to a simpler, agrarian society grounded in the moral and philosophical values of classical antiquity.

Although the motif of the phoenix and its eggs recurs throughout the latter half of the novel, the phoenix itself is never portrayed as originating from, or emerging within, the territorial domain of the Ming dynasty. Its initial appearance results from a summoning

[228] Ibid., 95: 1218.

performed by a foreign monk, and although the phoenix ultimately enters one of the eggs under the control of Jin Bifeng, its foreign provenance retains symbolic significance. The second and final appearance occurs when a pair of phoenixes emerges from the eggs and ascends to the heavens, seemingly flying away from the Ming state—an event that takes place beyond the territorial boundaries of the empire and is not directed toward acknowledging or venerating the Ming emperor. This narrative trajectory thus invites further interpretive consideration.

On one level, the political ideals embodied by the phoenix are realized only in a distant and imagined space beyond the seas, rather than within the actual territorial boundaries of the Ming empire. The primary beneficiaries of this utopian political and social order are not subjects of the Ming state, but rather the inhabitants of the fictional Safa Kingdom. Although the Ming army is permitted to witness these visions through the magical mediation of Jin Bifeng, they remain external to the lived experience of this ideal society—they are spectators rather than participants in the utopia.

On another level, the political utopia achieved through the phoenix egg may be interpreted as a mirage—an ideal that exists within the realm of imagination and myth, rather than as a practicable political reality. Furthermore, the fact that this entire process is orchestrated by Jin Bifeng, a Buddhist monk, complicates the ideological framework of the scene. His role invokes the Buddhist concept of emptiness, subtly suggesting the illusory, transient, and ultimately unattainable nature of the vision presented. In this light, while the narrative may seem to affirm the Ming dynasty's symbolic and political authority over foreign realms, it simultaneously conveys the author's underlying skepticism regarding the viability of Confucian utopian ideals. The text thus casts profound doubt on the feasibility of realizing sage rule within the historical and sociopolitical conditions of the Ming dynasty itself.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how *Sanbao* deploys the character of Wang Ming as a vehicle for political critique, particularly in relation to visual deception, ideological manipulation, and the contested legitimacy of Ming imperial authority. Wang Ming's symbolic association with the Ming state—alongside his morally ambivalent persona and reliance on illusion rather than force—establishes a pointed, ironic contrast with the Confucian model of sage kingship. While both Wang Ming and the sage ruler elicit voluntary submission, the mechanisms they employ are fundamentally distinct: the sage king governs through moral example and ethical leadership, whereas Wang Ming achieves compliance through spectacle, fabricated visions, and manipulation of perception. In doing so, *Sanbao* raises critical questions about the ideological foundations of Ming rule, suggesting that its claims to moral legitimacy may be more illusory than real.

Moreover, this chapter has argued that Wang Ming functions as a narrative thread linking two key visionary episodes in the novel—the appearance of exemplary ghosts and the recurring motif of phoenix eggs—both of which carry political significance and reflect aspirations for a return to sagely governance. These episodes engage in a complex intertextual dialogue with didactic works such as the *Quanjie tushuo*, drawing on shared moral exemplars while radically reinterpreting them. Whereas the *Quanjie tushuo* presents these figures as living models of virtue, *Sanbao* refigures them as restless ghosts who prefer to stay in the underworld, suggesting that the virtuous governance has become impossible in the absence of morally upright rulers. This transformation reflects a deeper skepticism about the moral and political conditions of the late Ming period.

The motif of the phoenix, traditionally a Confucian symbol of the arrival of a sage ruler and the dawn of an ideal political order, further complicates this critique. In *Sanbao*, the phoenix does not emerge within the Ming imperial domain; rather, it is first summoned by a

foreign monk and later appears beyond the empire's territorial boundaries. Its final ascension, which takes place in a distant and fictional land, offers no symbolic affirmation of Ming rule. Instead, the utopian society it signifies belongs to the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Safa, not to the Ming subjects. The Ming army is relegated to the role of passive observers, permitted to witness but not participate in this idealized vision of political harmony.

This utopia, however, may ultimately be understood as a mirage—an unattainable ideal confined to the realm of imagination and allegory. The fact that the vision is orchestrated by Jin Bifeng, a Buddhist monk, further complicates its ideological valence. His involvement invokes the Buddhist notion of emptiness, subtly highlighting the transient, illusory, and perhaps fundamentally unreal nature of the political ideal being portrayed. In this light, while the narrative may appear to reinforce Ming hegemony abroad, it simultaneously conveys profound skepticism regarding the viability of Confucian political ideals in the historical reality of the Ming dynasty. Through this layered portrayal, *Sanbao* not only interrogates the moral authority of the Ming state but also reflects a deeper, perhaps melancholic awareness of the impossibility of recovering the golden age of sage kingship in a world governed by illusion, spectacle, and imperial ambition.

CHAPTER V

REFLECTING LATE-MING SOCIETY: BETWEEN COMMODITY, ADVERTISEMENT, AND MORAL INSTRUCTION

Whereas the preceding chapters of this dissertation analyze Luo Maodeng's literati aspirations and his deployment of *Sanbao* as a vehicle for political allegory, the present and subsequent chapters shift attention to the work's commercial dimensions. I argue that *Sanbao* constitutes a distinctive hybrid, integrating two generic modes typically associated with divergent intellectual orientations and readerships. While the text adopts the organizational principles and narrative architecture characteristic of literati fiction, it simultaneously incorporates stylistic devices, descriptive conventions, and market-driven strategies drawn from the world of commercial print culture. This juxtaposition raises broader questions about Luo's literary aims and the audiences he sought to engage. To address these issues, this chapter is then divided into four sections, each examining a different facet of *Sanbao*'s hybrid composition.

The first section investigates Luo Maodeng's connections with Jinling Fuchun Hall (*Jinling Fuchuntang* 金陵富春堂), one of the most prominent commercial publishing houses in late-Ming Nanjing. Although relatively few biographical details about Luo have survived, his publication record—including a printed play, various prefaces he authored, and the works he annotated—offers a glimpse into his close involvement with the commercial book market. This section provides the foundation for examining how Luo's embeddedness in the realities of late-Ming print culture may have shaped his approach to composing, positioning, and conceptualizing *Sanbao*.

The second, “Skin and Spirit as Literati Fiction: Form, Structure, and Intention,” analyzes *Sanbao*’s conformity to the formal and thematic expectations of late-Ming literati fiction. Drawing on Andrew Plaks’s discussion of structural symmetry and moral intention, it argues that *Sanbao* possesses the narrative “bones” of a literati work, while its serious didactic aims provide the “spirit” that animates this framework. Because earlier scholarship has frequently juxtaposed *Sanbao* with the contemporaneous masterpiece *Journey to the West*—sometimes dismissing it as a flawed imitation—it is necessary to re-situate *Sanbao* within the broader discourse of literati fiction. This section reevaluates *Sanbao*’s engagement with generic conventions, its strategies of characterization, and its underlying authorial intention in relation to *Journey to the West*.

The third section, “Bone and Flesh as Commodities: Humor, Intertextuality, Repetition, and Appropriation,” shifts to the novel’s commercial stylistics. Despite its literati framework, *Sanbao*’s prose is strikingly plain, repetitive, and direct—features more closely associated with oral storytelling and market-oriented writing than with refined literary production. This section examines two principal dimensions of this commercial mode: the simplified, orally inflected narrative style and the extensive intertextual borrowing characteristic of late-Ming print culture. The example of Deng Zhimo 鄧志謨(1560–1624)—a prolific editor and novelist active during the Wanli reign—illustrates how *Sanbao* participates in a wider ecosystem of compilation, appropriation, and textual recycling. The stylistic simplicity and narrative directness of *Sanbao* emerge as deliberate strategies designed to expand its circulation among readers beyond the elite scholarly class.

The fourth section extends this analysis by examining the stylistic, structural, and thematic parallels between *Sanbao*’s catalogues of tribute missions to the Western Seas and the entries on foreign lands, peoples, and objects found in encyclopedias for daily-use (*riyong leishu* 日用類書). As Wu Huifang has noted, the *Wanbao quanshu* 萬寶全書 (*Encyclopedia*

of Myriad Treasures)—a widely circulated series of the encyclopedias for daily-use produced in the Jianyang publishing center—provides valuable insights into the tastes and curiosities of common readers during the Ming and Qing periods.[229] The resonances between *Sanbao* and the encyclopedias' sections on "foreign wonders" suggest not only shared representational conventions but also a convergence in commercial intent. By adopting catalogic formats, exotic descriptive strategies, and informational appeals characteristic of daily-use encyclopedias, *Sanbao* positions itself to attract a broad readership drawn to the marvelous, the foreign, and the practical.

Taken together, the analyses presented in this chapter demonstrate that *Sanbao* occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of literati fiction and commercial print culture. Its hybrid form reveals a sustained engagement with elite narrative conventions and the structural principles characteristic of late-Ming scholarly fiction. At the same time, the work also strategically responds to the tastes, expectations, and purchasing power of an expanding and increasingly diverse reading public.

5.1 Embedded in Print Culture: Luo Maodeng and the Commercial Publishing Networks of Nanjing

Building on the preceding chapters' analysis of Luo Maodeng's literati aspirations and his deployment of *Sanbao* as a vehicle for political allegory, this chapter shifts focus to the work's commercial dimensions. I argue that *Sanbao* functions as a hybrid text—one that intertwines the structural and ideological conventions of literati fiction with the market-oriented strategies of commercial publishing. Through this hybridization, the work addresses

[229] Wu Huifang 吳蕙芳, *Wanbao quanshu : Ming Qing shiqi de minjian shenghuo shilu* 萬寶全書: 明清時期的民間生活實錄 [*The Complete Compendium of Myriad Treasures: A Record of Popular Life in the Ming and Qing Period*] (Taipei: guoli zhengzhi daxue lishixuexi chuban 國立政治大學歷史學系出版 [Department of History, National Chengchi University], 2001), 90-114.

distinct yet partially overlapping readerships, positioning itself at the intersection of elite literary culture and the rapidly expanding commercial book market of the late-Ming period.

To explore this commercial dimension, a productive point of departure is Luo's close association with Jinling Fuchun Hall, one of the most influential publishing houses in late-Ming Nanjing. Although biographical details on Luo are sparse, his surviving publication record—including his printed play, the prefaces he authored, and the annotated works associated with his name—reveals active involvement in the commercial book world. This connection to Jinling Fuchun Hall places Luo squarely within Nanjing's vibrant print culture and provides a crucial framework for understanding *Sanbao*'s commercial orientation.

According to both extant records and modern scholarship, the proprietor of Fuchun Hall was Tang Fuchun 唐富春, courtesy name Duixi 對溪, whose shop operated on Sanshan Street 三山街. As one of the largest publishers in Nanjing during the Wanli period, Fuchun Hall specialized in the production of plays, vernacular fiction, medical treatises, and various miscellaneous texts. Scholars note that the press issued more than one hundred plays, each featuring either full-page illustrations or "double-page, facing-spread" (*shuangmian duiye* 雙面對頁) illustrations, both of which are framed by paired descriptive sentences printed along the right and left margins—a distinctive illustrative format associated with Jinling publishers.[230] This stylistic convention is especially significant, for the same format appears in the illustrations of the Wanli edition of *Sanbao*. Its presence highlights Luo's close integration into Jinling's commercial publishing networks and his familiarity with contemporary visual and textual market conventions. The broader implications of this illustrative practice, and its relationship to the commercial traits of *Sanbao*'s visual program, will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter.

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[230] Zhou Wu 周蕪, "Mingmo Jinling banhua,"明末金陵版畫 [Late-Ming Jinling Woodblock Prints], *Meishu* 美術, no. 2 (1985): 25.

The physical location of Jinling Fuchun Hall further reinforces this association. Situated on Sanshan Street (literally “Three-Mountains Street”), the press shares a striking nominal resonance with the pseudonym of *Sanbao*’s publisher, Sanshan daoren 三山道人(literally “Daoist of the Three Mountains”), a sobriquet that likely alludes to a Daoist adherent residing in the Sanshan Street area of Jinling (Nanjing). While it is impossible to confirm intentional correspondence, the parallel is nonetheless noteworthy.

As Lucille Chia has demonstrated, Sanshan Street offered convenient access to major educational institutions as well as the city’s most active entertainment districts, making it an ideal location for print production and book retailing. Chia further identifies Sanshan Daoren among Jinling publishers in her survey of late-Ming commercial printing. More broadly, much of what is known about Nanjing’s publishing industry centers on Sanshan Street, including the operations of the Tang family’s Jinling Fuchun Hall, one of the most prominent commercial presses of the period.[231] It therefore suggests that Luo operated within the publishing networks concentrated in the Sanshan Street district, one of Nanjing’s most active hubs of commercial print production. This geographical and cultural context makes it plausible that Luo not only collaborated with major commercial publishers but also shaped *Sanbao* in ways that aligned with the expectations, aesthetic conventions, and marketing strategies prevalent in this dynamic publishing environment.

The extent of Luo’s involvement with Jinling Fuchun Hall becomes even clearer when we consider his other surviving work. According to extant texts, in addition to *Sanbao*, Luo authored a dramatic work titled *Xinke chuxiang yinzhu Guanshiyin xiuxing Xiangshan ji* 新刻出像音註觀世音修行香山記 (*Newly Engraved, Illustrated, and Annotated Record of Guanshiyin’s Cultivation on Mount Xiang*), which was likewise published by Jinling Fuchun

[231] Chia, “Of Three Mountains Street,” 111. Chia lists Sanshan Daoren 三山道人 as one of the Jingling(Nanjing) publishers of the Ming in Table 3.1.

Hall (see Figure 5.1).[232] That this major dramatic work was produced by the same press—operated by the Tang family and widely recognized as one of the most prolific and prestigious Nanjing commercial publishers during the Wanli reign further underscores Luo's sustained collaboration with key actors in the book market.[233] This cumulative evidence points to Luo's deep entanglement with the commercial publishing sphere and provides essential context for understanding *Sanbao*'s hybrid literary-commercial character.

Luo's partnership with Fuchun Hall is further documented in several additional publications bearing his involvement. He authored the preface to *Xinke chuxiang zengbu Soushen ji* 新刻出像增補搜神記 (*Newly Engraved and Illustrated, Supplemented Soushen ji,* see Figure 5.2), which was issued by the same press, Jinling Fuchun Hall.[234] Furthermore, Luo also produced annotated editions of *Xixiang ji* 西廂記(*Romance of the Western Chamber*), *Chongjiao Baiyueting ji* 重校拜月亭記 (*Revised and Collated Record of the Pavilion for Worshiping the Moon*), published by Deshoutang 德壽堂, and *Toubi ji* 投筆記 (*The Tale of Casting Aside the Brush*, see Figure 5.3).[235]

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[232] See Luo Maodeng, *Xiangshan ji* (Jinling: Fuchun Tang, Wanli reign period, 1573– 1619). Reproduced from the *Guben xiqu congkan* 古本戲曲叢刊 (hereafter GBXQCK), 2nd series, box 1, 3:1.1a.

[233] Chen Zhaozhen 陳昭珍, *Mingdai shufang zhi yanjiu* 明代書坊之研究 (Taipei: huamulan wenhua, 2008), 8-9.

[234] A digital facsimile of *Xinke chuxiang zengbu Soushen ji* 新刻出像增補搜神記 is available through the National Archives of Japan:
https://www.digital.archives.go.jp/DAS/meta/listPhoto?LANG=eng&BID=F1000000000000102766&ID=M2013090221075899925&NO=&TYPE=JPEG&DL_TYPE=pdf.
Another copy is held by Harvard Library:
https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/chinese-rare-books/catalog/49-990081049590203941

[235] Scholar Dong Jie 董捷 examined all extant editions of Luo Maodeng's annotated versions of these works held in the National Library of China (Beijing) and the Zhejiang Library. Dong also identified Luo Maodeng's annotated edition of *Chongjiao Baiyueting ji*, published by Deshoutang, which—as Dong notes—was operated by the same owner of Fuchun Hall, Tang Fuchun. See Dong Jie, "Jinfan ying shi dao tianya: Jizhong xijian Wanming banhua chatu kaolun" 錦帆應是到天涯：幾種稀見晚明版畫插圖考論 [*Jinfan yingshi dao tianya*: A study of several rare late-Ming woodcut illustrations] *Zhongguo meishu xueyuan xuebao* 中國美術學院學報, no. 9 (2020): 31–33. Also see *Toubi ji* 投筆記's digital archive from Zhejiang Library.
https://history.zjlib.cn/app/universal-search/resource/62836c17d8147868cc5325b1/details?wfwfid=2120&searchId=24016&params=&pageId=107556&searchType=1&classifyId=&classifyName=

Furthermore, scholar Ma Meng-Ching's study of extant editions of *Xixiang ji* provides further insight into both the visual culture and commercial publishing environment in which Luo Maodeng operated. Examining surviving late-Ming editions, Ma argues that publishers increasingly emphasized the visual dimensions of books, particularly through the adoption of multicolor printing techniques and the emergence of framed illustrations that organized scenes within carefully constructed pictorial spaces. Such developments reflect a growing awareness of the visual appeal of printed books and the importance of illustration within the competitive commercial book market.[236]

More significantly, Ma's survey of extant Ming editions of Wang Shifu 王實甫(1260-1336)'s *Xixiang ji* identifies two Wanli-period editions bearing Luo Maodeng's imprint as publisher. Now preserved in the National Library of China in Beijing 北京國家圖書館 and the Institute of Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 中國社會科學院文學研究所, these editions offer concrete bibliographical evidence that Luo participated directly in the publication and marketing of books, extending his role beyond that of author and commentator.[237] Luo would therefore have possessed firsthand knowledge of both the visual and commercial dimensions of late-Ming print culture. His familiarity with readers' expectations and market demands makes it more likely that the composition, organization, and visual imagination of *Sanbao* were shaped not only by literary concerns but also by strategies intended to enhance the book's appeal within the expanding commercial marketplace.

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[236] Ma Meng-ching 馬孟晶, "Ermu zhi wan: Cong *Xixiang ji* banhua chatu lun Wan Ming chuban wenhua dui shijuexing zhi guanzhu" 耳目之玩—從《西廂記》版畫插圖論晚明出版文化對視覺性之關注 [Looking through the Frame: Visuality in Late-Ming Illustrations to "The Story of the Western Wing"], *Guoli Taiwan daxue meishushi yanjiu jikan* 國立臺灣大學美術史研究集刊 [*National Taiwan University Journal of Art History*] 13 (2002): 201–276.

[237] Ma, "Ermu zhi wan," 252. See Ma Meng-ching's table "Extant Ming Editions of Wang Shifu's *Xixiang ji*" 現存王實甫《西廂記》明代刊本, which records two Wanli-period editions of the *Xixiang ji* catalogued as editions published by Luo Maodeng.

Taken together, these works reveal Luo's continuous and active engagement with late-Ming commercial print networks and illuminate the hybrid literary-commercial orientation that shapes *Sanbao* itself. They portray Luo as an author, annotator, and possibly even a publisher, operating at the intersection of elite literary ambition and the commercial imperatives of the Nanjing book market. Building on this context, the remainder of this chapter shifts from Luo's professional affiliations to the textual and visual implications of this dual orientation, examining how commercial print practices informed—and, at times, reconfigured—the narrative and illustrative strategies of *Sanbao*.

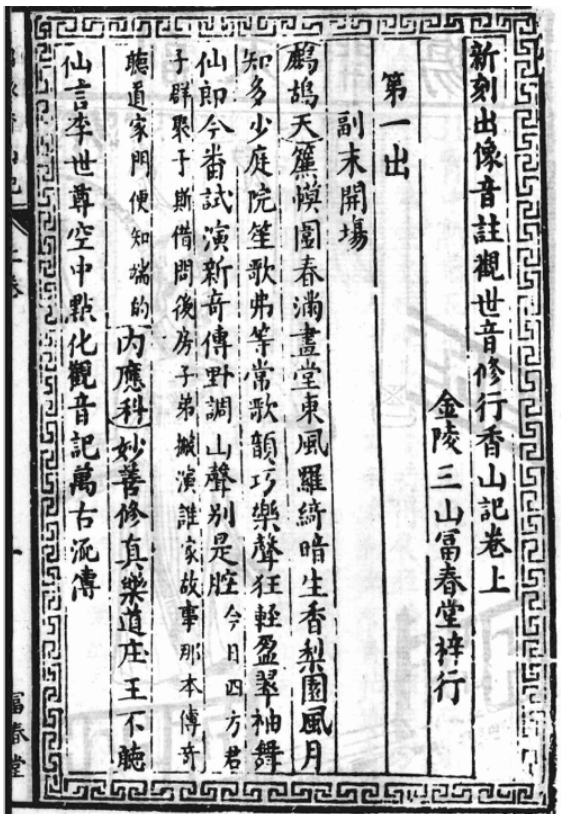
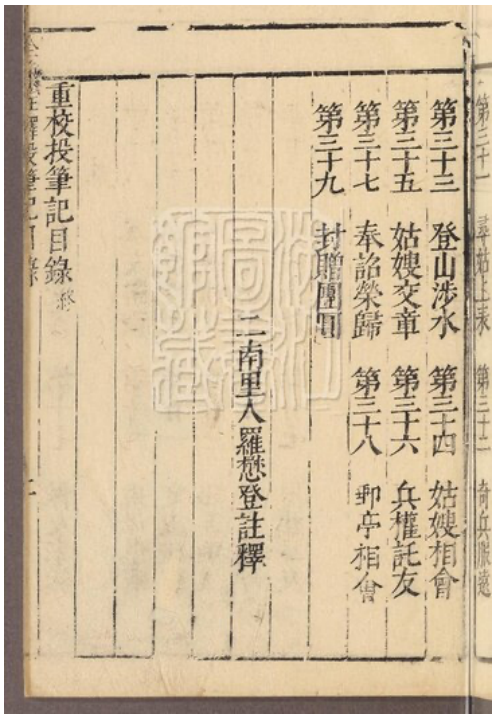

新刻出像音註觀世音修行香山記卷上
金陵三山富春堂梓行
第一出
副末開場
鸚鵡天籠嘆園春滿畫堂東風羅綺暗生香梨園風月
知多少庭院笙歌弗等常歌韻巧樂聲狂輕盈翠袖舞
仙郎今番試演新奇傳野調山聲別是腔今日四方君
子群聚于斯借問後房子弟搬演誰家故事那本傳奇
聽道家門便知端的
內應科妙善修真樂道庄王不聽
仙言李世尊空中點化觀音記萬古流傳

Figure 5.1: *Xiangshan ji*, published by Jinling: Fuchun Tang, 1573– 1619. Reproduced from GBXQCK, 2nd series, box 1, 3:1.1a.



不襲于舊能浮于意發于未明增
于所未備卓我神也要在造民福
而拱翼我
皇圖于億萬斯永者不肖媿非劉君
能無董狐之賞于心耶嗟乎幽明
一也神唯靈而後傳紀記傳而神
之靈益傳世有我大冠拖長紳哼
呵擁衛既自赫然稱神矣迺復身
世與草木同朽腐而令史冊闕無
聞述可乎
登之甫羅慈登書

Figure 5.2: *Soushen ji*, published by Jinling: Fuchun Tang, National Archives of Japan.



第三十三 登山涉水 第三十四 姑嫂相會
第三十五 姑嫂交童 第三十六 兵權託友
第三十七 奉詔榮歸 第三十八 郵亭相會
第三十九 封贈團圓
二南里人羅慈登註釋
重校投筆記目錄終

Figure 5.3: *Toubi ji* 投筆記, Zhejiang Library

Table 1: Selected Publications Associated with Luo Maodeng

Title	Information	Source
Xinke chuxiang yinzhu Guanshiyin xiuxing Xiangshan ji 新刻出像音註觀世音修行香山記	Written by Luo Maodeng of the Ming dynasty and preserved in two *juan*. The extant edition was printed during the Wanli period by the Tang family's Fuchun Hall in Jinling (Nanjing), though the surviving copy contains several missing pages.	GBXQCK, second Series (1955).
Xinke chuxiang zengbu Soushen ji 新刻出像增補搜神記	Preface written by Luo Maodeng of the Ming dynasty. The extant edition was printed during the Wanli period by the Tang family's Fuchun Hall in Jinling (Nanjing).	National Archives of Japan; Harvard Library
Zhong xiao Toubi ji 重校投筆記	Written by the Ming author Huashan jushi 華山居士, with annotations by Luo Maodeng. The work is preserved in two *juan*. A Ming-period printed edition was subsequently re-edited during the Qing dynasty.	Zhejiang Library Digital Collections
Zhong xiao Jinyin ji 重校金印記	Written by the Ming author Su Fuzhi 蘇復之, with explanatory annotations by Luo Maodeng. The work comprises two *juan* and was originally printed during the Wanli reign.	GBXQCK, first Series (1954).
Quan xiang zhushi Xixiang ji 全像註釋西廂記	Published during the Wanli reign period (1573–1620), with illustrations interspersed throughout the text; published by Luo Maodeng. Now preserved in the National Library of China in Beijing and the Institute of Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.	Compiled by the author based on Ma Meng-ching (2002).
Zhongxiao bei Xixiang ji 重校北西廂記	Carved by Liu Ciquan, catalogued as a Luo Maodeng imprint, with illustrations integrated into the body of the text.	Compiled by the author based on Ma Meng-ching (2002).

5.2 Skin and Spirit of the Literati Novel: Form, Structure, and Authorial Intention

In the preceding chapters, I have argued that the novelist employed *Sanbao* as a vehicle for articulating political critique and for expressing his aspirations toward the governance ideals of the ancient sage kings. Such a serious authorial intention aligns the work with the conventions of the literati novel, which primarily addressed an elite readership concerned with political and moral issues. As Andrew Plaks—whose formalist and structuralist approach emphasizes the text's compositional logic—argues in his seminal study of late-imperial fiction, the literati novel encodes meaning through a consciously designed narrative

structure.[238] These structural and stylistic characteristics correspond closely to those found in *Sanbao*, whose form and organization reflect the same meticulous craftsmanship and intellectual design that typify late-Ming literati fiction.

Beyond its serious authorial intention, *Sanbao*, like many other late-Ming literati novels, adopts a one-hundred-chapter structure that can be divided into two distinct halves. The first fifty chapters culminate in the subjugation of the Kingdom of Women, marking a pivotal transition from the exercise of overt military power to the deployment of visual and symbolic forms of domination. At the outset of the latter fifty chapters, Wang Ming acquires the Invisibility Grass—an episode that inaugurates a new narrative mode in which foreign kingdoms submit to the Ming empire through Wang Ming's manipulation of vision and perception rather than through martial conquest. Furthermore, this bipartite design is reinforced by the novel's symmetrical framing. The opening eight chapters function as a prologue, recounting the background and miraculous origins of the protagonist, Jin Bifeng—his incarnation as the Dīpaṃkara Buddha, his birth, and his upbringing as a distinguished monk. Correspondingly, the concluding eight chapters serve as an epilogue, depicting the Ming army's withdrawal following their final expedition to the Kingdom of Ghosts and their subsequent return voyage to the Ming realm.

Such symmetrical structuring of the opening and concluding chapters recalls *Journey to the West*, a text that seems to have served as an important model for *Sanbao* in its characterization and structural arrangement. The first eight chapters of *Journey to the West* similarly function as a prologue, narrating the origins and background of the main protagonist, Sun Wukong. Early scholarship on *Sanbao* has often emphasized the influence of *Journey to the West*, particularly regarding their shared aesthetic conventions typical of the *literati novel.* These include parallel structural arrangements, rhythmic plot progression, and

[238] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, 96, 216, 497-498.

the symmetrical configuration of principal characters. For instance, Roderich Ptak argues that *Sanbao* embodies the synthesis of the Three Teachings —Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism— akin to *Journey to the West*, as evidenced by structural correspondences and the use of paired figures in both works. Ptak further suggests that both novels metaphorically encapsulate the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, which functions as a unifying principle integrating diverse doctrinal and thematic elements, including Daoist and Confucian thought.[239] Yet, contrary to Ptak's interpretation that privileges the novel's religious dimensions, I contend that *Sanbao* should instead be read as a political allegory that rewrites the historical narrative of Zheng He's voyages to question the legitimacy of the Jiajing and Wanli emperors.

Although *Sanbao* does not directly reference *Journey to the West*, scholars have long recognized the close relationship between the two novels.[240] Beyond their structural and narrative similarities, *Sanbao* also appropriates specific episodes from the earlier work. In 1592 edition, chapters 10–11 of *Journey to the West*, the narrative recounts the story of a dragon king who, in an attempt to outwit a human fortune-teller, defies the Jade Emperor's command to produce rain. As punishment, Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643), a prominent Tang official serving under Emperor Taizong 唐太宗 (r. 626–649), is appointed by the Jade Emperor to execute the dragon. Desperate to save his own life, the dragon king appeals to Emperor Taizong for protection; yet despite the emperor's efforts, Wei Zheng decapitates the dragon while dreaming. The dragon's spirit subsequently lodges a complaint with King Yama in the underworld, resulting in Emperor Taizong's temporary summons to the realm of the

[239] Ptak, "Hsi-Yang Chi," 120-121, 139-140.
[240] Gregory, "Daydreaming Dynasty," 11, 17-20; see also Plaks, *The Four Masterworks*, 13, 17, 19, 96, 216, 497- 498.

dead, where he undertakes a visionary tour.[241] This episode reappears in *Sanbao*'s chapter 21, where another dragon king retells the same tale to Jin Bifeng, underscoring the novel's intertextual engagement with *Journey to the West*.[242]

At the same time, the religious dimensions of *Sanbao*—which seem, at first glance, to parallel those of *Journey to the West*—require more careful reconsideration. The figure of Jin Bifeng, a Buddhist monk whose previous incarnation is the Dīpaṃkara Buddha, might initially seem to anchor the novel firmly within a devotional or hagiographic mode. The rivalry between Jin Bifeng and the Celestial Master Zhang, as well as the magical conflicts between the Ming army and foreign kingdoms, further reinforces the impression that *Sanbao* belongs to the domains of god-and-demon fiction (*shenmo xiaoshuo* 神魔小說) or religious fiction. It is precisely this superficial similarity that makes the contrast between the two works all the more striking.

Yet, despite these shared supernatural elements, I argue that the two works ultimately pursue fundamentally different aims. While *Journey to the West* employs the supernatural mode as an allegory of individual self-cultivation, charting its protagonists' gradual progress toward spiritual insight and inner transformation, *Sanbao* mobilizes the same mythological and fantastic conventions to advance a political allegory. Rather than illuminating the path to personal enlightenment, *Sanbao* critiques imperial authority by reframing Zheng He's maritime expeditions as a commentary on late-Ming politics. Thus, although the two novels share formal structures, intertextual resonances, and conventions typical of late-Ming literati fiction, their narrative orientations diverge sharply: *Journey to the West* turns inward toward

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[241] Wu Cheng'en, *The Journey to the West*. Edited and translated by Anthony Yu (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 214-236; see also Wu Cheng'en 吳承恩, *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan,1961), 104-126.

[242] Luo, *Sanbao*, 21: 271-274.

spiritual refinement, whereas *Sanbao* turns outward toward political criticism and the question of legitimate rule.

5.3 Bone and Flesh as Commodities: Intertextuality, Orality, Repetition, and Appropriation

Although *Sanbao* adheres to the structural conventions of the late-Ming literati novel, it simultaneously exhibits commercial features, including humorous, playful, and orally inflected modes of expression, as well as characteristics that contemporary scholars identify with a distinctly "hucksterish" print culture. As Yuming He argues, such "'hucksterish' Ming productions" reflected, on the one hand, "a book culture that struck those eighteenth-century scholars as shockingly lax, cavalier, unscrupulous, and heterodox," and on the other, "the motivations and strategies of production, promotion, and consumption driven by a burgeoning and unkempt marketplace for a bewildering variety of woodblock publications."[243]

Moreover, because the written vernacular was intimately linked to the spoken language of the time, it was commonly employed in texts that sought to reproduce oral expression or were intended for oral performance. In many instances, its stylistic features were deliberately shaped to evoke the effect of orality. As He further observes, the frequent and casual deployment of phonological cues in Ming commercial texts suggests a textual environment in which a book's value often resided in its potential to facilitate oral re-performance.[244] Consequently, the vernacular came to be described by the term *su* 俗—connoting "vulgar" or "popular"—a label that reinforced its long-standing association with *tongsu xiaoshuo* 通俗小說, or popular fiction.[245]

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[243] He, *Home and the World*, 3.
[244] He, *Home and the World*, 81.
[245] Cynthia J. Brokaw and Kai-Wing Chow, eds., *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press,2005), 12. http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0412/2003027385.html. Also see

The commercial dimensions of *Sanbao* become clearer when placed in dialogue with other late-Ming works deeply embedded in the print marketplace. A useful point of comparison can be found in Deng Zhimo's *Zhouzao ji* 咒棗記(ca. 1603), published only a few years after the appearance of *Sanbao*. Deng—a prolific novelist, editor, and tutor to the influential Yu publishing family of Jianyang—was a pivotal figure in the commercial literary culture of the Wanli period. In Chapter 12 of *Zhouzao ji*, the Daoist priest Sa Shoujian 薩守堅 undertakes a journey to the underworld, where a ghostly judge guides him through the eight palaces of the "Reward Good Behaviors Platform" and introduces a series of exemplary figures.[246]

Although the exemplary figures encountered in *Zhouzao ji* differ substantially from those presented in *Sanbao*, the two works exhibit notable textual overlap and strikingly structural similarities. In both texts, for example, the protagonist asks why the filial exemplars residing in the Reward Good Behaviors Platform have not yet been reincarnated into the human world. The judge responds that "those dwelling in the platform possess the righteous *qi* of Heaven and Earth and therefore remain exempt from ordinary reincarnation; when an enlightened ruler appears, they will be reborn as kings, ministers, generals, and officials, but in the absence of such a ruler they continue to enjoy heavenly blessings in the underworld" 這些賞善行台裏面的人，都得天地之正氣，無了無休。每遇明君治世，則生為王侯將相，流芳百世。不遇明君治世，則安享陰司，默受天福.[247] The passage appears in *Zhouzao ji* and *Sanbao* in identical form.

Patrick Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 5-6; Stephen Owen, "End of the Past: Rewriting Chinese Literary History in the Early Republic," In Doleželová-Velingerová, Milena, Oldřich Král, eds., *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital China's May Fourth Project* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 171-172.

246 Deng Zhimo, *Zhouzao ji: [14 hui]*. Vol. 119 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), 12: 153-163.

247 Ibid., 154.

Similar instances occur elsewhere in *Zhouzao ji*. In the "Palace of Trustworthiness and Sincerity"信實之府, for example, the judge introduces a group of historical exemplars through language that closely parallels a passage in *Sanbao*.[248] The coexistence of divergent exemplary figures alongside identical or near-identical passages illustrates the highly intertextual nature of late-Ming commercial publishing, in which authors freely borrowed, adapted, and recombined existing materials while reshaping them for new textual contexts and audiences.

The broader significance of these parallels becomes clearer when situated within Deng Zhimo's larger literary project. Noga Ganany's study of Deng Zhimo's hagiographic "Saints Trilogy" further clarifies the nature of this shared environment. She identifies these works—including *Zhouzao ji* and *Feijian ji* 飛劍記 (*The Flying Sword*), both published during the Wanli period—as operating in a "vernacular prose-narrative mode" that draws upon an eclectic range of sources, including canonical Daoist inner-alchemy treatises, poetry, anecdotal literature, and folktales. Ganany argues that by embedding such diverse content within extended vernacular narrative forms of fiction (*xiaoshuo*), Deng's works collapse the classificatory boundaries that had long structured the presentation of knowledge in encyclopedias and anthologies. She further observes that these texts position themselves at the intersection of hagiographic traditions and the expanding sphere of commercially produced storytelling.[249] Furthermore, Deng's deep entanglement in the Jianyang printing world—one of the most vibrant commercial hubs of the period—further enabled him to develop as a "marketable" writer capable of producing entertaining, middle-brow narratives with notable efficiency, especially when packaged in visually appealing formats.[250]

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[248] Ibid., 159. The judge's description of the ghostly figures in the "Palace of Trustworthiness and Sincerity" (信實之府) is nearly identical to the corresponding passage in *Sanbao*.

[249] Noga Ganany, "Writing and Worship in Deng Zhimo's *Saints Trilogy*" In *Religions*, 13, no. 2 (2022): 128. doi:10.3390/rel13020128.

[250] Chia, *Printing for Profit*, 160-161.

When viewed alongside these characteristics, *Sanbao*'s own textual practices—its intertextual density, generic hybridity, and the author's embeddedness in major publishing networks—closely parallel those of Deng's oeuvre and illuminate Luo Maodeng's comparable position within the late-Ming commercial literary sphere. Moreover, the intertextual relationship between *Sanbao* and *Zhouzao ji* suggests not merely shared literary conventions but possible direct textual borrowing. Given the close textual correspondences and the proximity of their publication dates, it is possible that Deng Zhimo had access to *Sanbao* during the composition of *Zhouzao ji*. As Lucille Chia has observed, Jianyang commercial publishers frequently collaborated with other publishing houses not only within Jianyang itself but also across geographically distant centers, particularly Jinling (Nanjing). Chia further suggests that Tang Fuchun, the proprietor of Fuchun Hall with whom Luo Maodeng maintained close associations, likely participated in publishing collaborations that linked Jianyang and Jinling.[251]

This interconnected publishing ecology offers a plausible explanation for the extensive textual correspondences between the works of Luo Maodeng and Deng Zhimo. Such similarities may have arisen through direct collaboration, competition within the book market, or access to a shared pool of narrative materials. Although Luo Maodeng and Deng Zhimo worked in different regional publishing centers, both operated within highly commercialized environments, which facilitated the rapid circulation of motifs, episodes, and narrative structures.

Yet the relationship between the two authors is not unidirectional. While *Zhouzao ji* may draw upon *Sanbao*, a converse pattern of intertextuality emerges when comparing *Sanbao*'s Chapter 11 with Deng Zhimo's *Feijian ji*. Although the precise publication date of *Feijian ji* remains unknown and the work can only be dated broadly to the Wanli period, the close

[251] Ibid.,165, 233.

textual correspondences between the two works point to a significant degree of literary exchange. Such reciprocal borrowing reflects the competitive dynamics of the commercial book market, where appropriation, adaptation, and recombination were common modes of textual production. These practices created a commercial environment in which textual materials could be circulated, reused, and repackaged across different publishing centers.

These dynamics are further exemplified in *Sanbao*'s Chapter 11, which contains a passage nearly identical to one in *Feijian ji*.[252] In this episode, *Sanbao* recounts the origin of the city god (*chenghuang* 城隍) of Lishui county (*lishui xian* 溧水縣), narrating how the Daoist immortal Lü Chunyang 呂純陽—more commonly as Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓, one of the legendary Eight Immortals—seduces a beautiful woman in order to perform the Daoist ritual of "extracting yin to replenish yang" (*caiyin buyang* 採陰補陽). As *Sanbao* relates the episode,

> The scene unfolds in the capital of the Southern Dynasties, within a garden located on Hundred-Flowers Lane. There, a young lady leads several maidservants as they stroll about, singing responsively to one another. Observing the myriad plants sprouting and the flowers blooming in profusion, the young lady cannot help but recite an old lyric:
>
> "A maiden of eighteen enters the garden fair,
> Plucking blossoms, tearful in despair.
> Flowers bloom and wither year by year—
> But once youth is gone, it ne'er reappears."
>
> Among her attendants, one perceptive maid grasps her mistress's sentiment and answers with another verse:
>
> "Alas! An inch of time is worth an inch of gold,
> Yet an inch of gold cannot buy an inch of time.

[252] Deng Zhimo, *Feijian ji: [13 hui]*. Vol. 119 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), 5: 53-65. *Feijian ji* is also known as *Qie Tangdai Lü Chunyang dedao feijian ji* 鍥唐代呂純陽得道飛劍記 [*The Engraved Account of Lü Chunyang of the Tang Dynasty Attaining the Dao and the Flying Sword*].

When all the gold is spent, more may be found—
But lost time can never be reclaimed."

Yet where there is one discerning mind, there is also one lacking in sensibility. A less perceptive maid then joins in, singing:

"Thirteen, fourteen—the prime of youth,
Yet here I am, eighteen, nineteen, still unwed.
When I reach twenty or thirty, beauty fades;
Who then will know my lonely bed, my cold pillow?"

Overhearing these songs, Lü Chunyang reflects to himself: "Ah, these young spirits are already stirred by the impulses of spring! I shall descend and see them for myself."

只見是個南朝城中百花巷裡一所花園，花園之內，一個閨女領著幾個丫環行歌互答。原來這個閨女領了幾個丫環，看見那百草排芽，雜花開放，不覺唱個舊詞兒，說道：『二九佳人進花園，手扯花枝淚漣漣。花開花謝年年有，人老何曾再少年？』內中就有個知趣的丫頭，就接著唱一個說道：『可歎一寸光陰一寸金，寸金難買寸光陰。寸金使盡金還在，過去光陰哪裡尋？』天下事有個知趣的，就有個不知趣的，那不知趣的就唱一個說道：『十三十四正當時，只我十八十九還婚姻遲。二十三十容顏退，衾寒枕冷哪個知？』呂純陽聽知這些歌兒，心裡說道：『小鬼頭春心動也！待我下去走一遭來。」[253]

Although this passage appears verbatim in *Feijian ji*, chapter 5, the two works diverge significantly in narrative purpose and thematic focus. Both texts recount Lü Dongbin's seduction of the young woman, whom he exploits as a means to extract yin and replenish his own yang energy. This transgressive act is later discovered by another powerful immortal, who intervenes to rescue the woman. However, while *Feijian ji* is primarily devoted to the miraculous deeds and erotic exploits of Lü Dongbin, *Sanbao* significantly expands upon the episode by introducing additional narrative developments—most notably the story of Lü's son, who, after rising to prominence as a virtuous official, ultimately takes his own life in

[253] Luo, *Sanbao*, 11:135.

order to protest before the Jade Emperor upon realizing that his conduct in office has brought suffering and injustice upon the people.[254]

Although *Feijian ji* can only be dated broadly to the Wanli period, making its precise chronological relationship to *Sanbao* uncertain, the textual evidence suggests that *Sanbao* was more likely composed after *Feijian ji*, or at least after a version of the shared narrative was already in circulation. The passage in *Sanbao* reproduces the corresponding episode in *Feijian ji* almost verbatim before extending the narrative with the introduction of a new character—the son, Bai—who is born to the woman whom Lü uses to extract *yin* to replenish his *yang*, and thus conceived with Lü's pure yang essence. What is particularly intriguing, however, is that—as I suggest elsewhere—the relationship between *Sanbao* and Deng Zhimo's *Zhouzao ji* displays a reversed form of intertextuality.

This child, Bai, endowed with extraordinary virtue and intelligence, matures into an exemplary official whose only indulgence is a daily bowl of chicken-egg soup for nourishment. One night, however, mice steal all the eggs from his cabinet—ingeniously transporting them one by one, with one mouse lying on its back to cradle the egg while another drags it by the tail. The following morning, the missing eggs lead to false accusations, and the gatekeepers are tortured into confessing crimes they did not commit. Confronted with this miscarriage of justice, Bai suddenly recognizes how many innocent lives he himself may have wronged during his years in office. Overcome with remorse, he strikes his head against a pillar and dies on the spot. Moved by his integrity and self-sacrifice, the Jade Emperor appoints him as the City God of Lishui County so that he might continue protecting the innocent in the afterlife.[255]

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[254] Ibid., 11: 138-140.
[255] Ibid., 11: 140.

Through this transformation, *Sanbao* not only adapts a preexisting narrative from *Feijian ji* but also recontextualizes it within a moral and political framework, transforming a supernatural religious tale into an allegory of governance and bureaucratic ethics. This act of borrowing and creative reconfiguration exemplifies the fluid interplay between intertextuality, plagiarism, and innovation characteristic of the late-Ming "hucksterish" print culture. By reworking Deng Zhimo's hagiographic episode into a narrative imbued with political and moral significance, *Sanbao* recasts a tale of divine seduction and transcendence as a meditation on the ethical burdens of governance and the moral responsibilities of officialdom, thereby integrating the supernatural within the novel's broader didactic and ideological project.

Beyond the blurred boundary between intertextuality and plagiarism, *Sanbao* also displays a playful, orally inflected stylistic quality characteristic of late-Ming commercial print culture. For instance, in Chapter 7, during Jin Bifeng's magical confrontation with two spirits, the narrative introduces a series of passages that are deliberately plain, highly repetitive, and marked by a sense of orally inflected, playful excess.

> (A)
> The two (spirits) fled to Jade Goose Peak, and Jin Bifeng hit them all the way to Jade Goose Peak; they fled to Magu Peak, and Jin Bifeng likewise hit them to Magu Peak; they fled to Celestial Maiden Peak, and Jin Bifeng hit them to Celestial Maiden Peak; they fled to Huizhen Peak, and Jin Bifeng hit them to Huizhen Peak; they fled to Huixian Peak, and Jin Bifeng hit them to Huixian Peak; they fled to Embroidered Splendor Peak, and Jin Bifeng hit them to Embroidered Splendor Peak; they fled to Tortoiseshell Peak, and Jin Bifeng hit them to Tortoiseshell Peak; they fled into the Golden Sand Cave, and Jin Bifeng hit them to the Golden Sand Cave; they fled into the Stone Mortar Cave, and Jin Bifeng hit them to the Stone Mortar Cave…他兩個就走到玉鵝峰上去，長老就打到玉鵝峰上去；他兩個走到麻姑峰上去，長老也打到麻姑峰上去；他兩個走到仙女峰上去，長老也打到仙女峰上去；他兩個走到會真峰上去，長老也打到會真峰上去；他兩個走到會仙峰上去，長老也打到會仙峰上去；他兩個走到錦繡峰上去，長老也打到

錦繡峰上去；他兩個走到玳瑁峰上去，長老也打到玳瑁峰上去；他兩個走到金沙洞裡去，長老也打到金沙洞裡去；他兩個走到石臼洞裡去，長老也打到石臼洞裡去…[256]

This passage vividly illustrates the narrative's vernacular, storytelling mode, repetitive, and playfully exaggerated style in its depiction of the protracted combat and pursuit between Jin Bifeng and the two spirits. The text reiterates a sequence of nearly identical sentences describing the spirits' flight from one mountain peak to another—Jade Goose Peak, Magu Peak, Celestial Maiden Peak, and so forth—each followed by Jin Bifeng's unyielding pursuit. Such formulaic repetition exemplifies the pseudo-orality common to popular late-Ming commercial texts, marked by unadorned diction, lighthearted and repetitive humor, and an uninhibited mode of textual production that privileges entertainment over literary refinement. This rhythmic pattern underscores the commodified aesthetics of late-Ming print culture, in which repetition, abundance, and playfulness functioned as strategies to capture readers' attention within an increasingly competitive literary marketplace.

The following two passages likewise exhibit the commodified aesthetics of late-Ming print culture through their use of vernacular repetition, playful allusions to historical figures, and phonetic mimicry. Such features not only enhance the performative rhythm of the narrative but also reveal the text's conscious engagement with the aesthetics of mass entertainment, in which sound, repetition, and allusion function simultaneously as literary devices and commercial strategies.

(B)
The battle raged from Great Emei Mountain to Middle Emei Mountain, from Middle Emei Mountain to Little Emei Mountain, and from Little Emei Mountain back to Great Emei Mountain…Among the forty-some caves, which one did not echo with the *jingjing* and *dingding* of the Nine-Ringed Staff? Among the thirty-six twin grottoes, which one did not resound with its *bingbing* and *bobo* reverberations? 只見大峨眉山上打到中峨眉山上，中

[256] Ibid., 7: 88.

峨眉山上打到小峨眉山上，小峨眉山上又打到大峨眉山上。….大小洞約有四十餘個，哪個洞裡不聽得這九環錫杖珫珫玎玎？洞裡穴約有三十六雙，哪個穴道不聽得這九環錫杖石兵石兵磭磭？[257]

(C)

Then the spirits began making noisy sounds—*pupu baba*—as one mouth became two, two mouths became three, three became four, four became five, five became six, six became seven, seven became eight, eight became nine, and nine became ten. Jin Bifeng asked, "What kind of mouths are these that you keep adding?" The demons replied, "They are all YiQin's mouths." The elder said, "Why are they all YiQin's mouths?" The demons answered, "If they were not the mouths of Yi and Qin, how could there be so many?" 又只見這些妖精叾叾吧吧，一會兒一個口添做兩個口，兩個口添做三個口，三個口添做四個口，四個口添做五個口，五個口添做六個口，六個口添做七個口，七個口添做八個口，八個口添做九個口，九個口添做十個口。長老道：「添的都是甚麼口？」眾妖精說道：「添的都是儀秦口。」長老道：「怎麼添的都是儀秦的口？」眾妖精道：「不是儀秦的口，怎麼得這等的多？」[258]

Taken together, these passages once again exemplify the text's playful, oral-performance style, and commercially oriented qualities. The first passage (B) manipulates scale and repetition by shifting from the "Great" Emei Mountain to the "Middle" and "Little" Emei Mountains, before returning again to the "Great" Emei Mountain. This structural variation, combined with the rhythmic use of onomatopoetic sounds such as *"jingjing and ding-ding"* or *"bing-bing and bo-bo,"* creates a humorous and entertaining effect that would have appealed to a popular readership. The second passage (C) further extends this playful mode by depicting the spirits' mouths multiplying progressively—one becoming two, then three, and so on, up to ten. While this exaggerated transformation may lack explicit symbolic meaning, its numerical progression and absurd imagery serve primarily to amuse, allowing readers to experience a sense of lightness and comic relief.

[257] Ibid., 7: 90.
[258] Ibid., 8: 97.

Moreover, similar to other "hucksterish" late-Ming texts—such as encyclopedias for daily-use that blend practical information, moral instruction, and historical anecdotes within accessible and colloquial prose—passage (C) embeds subtle historical references within its seemingly trivial narrative. Specifically, the passage's mention of *Yiqin* 儀秦 alludes to the historical figures Zhang Yi 張儀 (before 329–309 BCE) and Su Qin 蘇秦 (?–284 BCE), both renowned political strategists of the Warring States period. Su Qin advocated for vertical alliance (*he zong* 合縱) among the six states against Qin, whereas Zhang Yi promoted *lian heng* 連橫 (horizontal alliance) to assist Qin in dismantling that coalition and ultimately facilitating its unification of China. The passage's reference to "YiQin" thus evokes the rhetorical brilliance of these two strategists, linking the spirits' multiple mouths to their persuasive eloquence. Through this layered intertextual play, the text transforms a seemingly nonsensical episode into one that simultaneously entertains and alludes to historical and rhetorical sophistication.

Extensive research on late-Ming literati fiction has highlighted the intricate relationship between Ming–Qing novels and *riyong leishu*, noting how works such as *Jin Ping Mei* exemplify a shared intertextuality, thematic concern, and common sources with these popular compilations.[259] Elements such as jokes, medical prescriptions, and divination formulas frequently overlap between the two genres, reflecting a broad convergence of literary and utilitarian culture in the late-Ming period. *Sanbao* similarly follows this trend, sharing many features with commercially oriented texts such as late-Ming daily-use encyclopedias, particularly in its incorporation of practical and informational content.

As a narrative chronicling the Ming navy's voyages across diverse regions of Southeast Asia, *Sanbao* integrates extensive geographical and ethnographic detail drawn from historical

[259] Shang, "The Making of the Everyday World," 66.

records and travel accounts authored by interpreters who accompanied Zheng He on his maritime expeditions. Among these sources, *Yingyai shenglan* and *Xingcha shenglan* 星槎勝覽 (*The Overall Survey of the Starry Raft*), written by Fei Xin (1388–?), who likewise served as an interpreter on four of Zheng He's voyages. A comparable body of overseas knowledge also circulated through encyclopedias for daily-use (*riyong leishu* 日用類書). While the foreign kingdoms described in their Sections on Foreign Peoples (*zhuyi men* 諸夷門) are not always associated with the same commodities recorded in *Yingyai shenglan* and related travel accounts, they nevertheless reveal broadly similar regional patterns in the representation of overseas products and resources. The integration of such documentary materials imparts to *Sanbao* an encyclopedic quality: its detailed portrayals of the foreign kingdoms visited by the Ming fleet not only enrich the novel's descriptive texture but also reinforce its claim to empirical authority and erudition.[260]

A clear example appears in Chapter 59, where the Ming navy passes through the Kingdom of Ceylon (*xilan guo* 錫蘭國) and Kingdom of Liushan (*liu shan guo* 溜山國). In this episode, Jin Bifeng and Huang Fengxian engage in a dialogue that closely parallels the content of *Yingyai shenglan*. Large portions of their exchange reproduce Ma Huan's account of the Kingdom of Ceylon almost verbatim. In *Yingyai shenglan*, Ma Huan writes:

> "The harbor of the Kingdom of Ceylon is called, Biluoli (別羅里). From this anchorage, one proceeds inland to reach the site. At the foot of a mountain by the sea lies a smooth stone upon which there is a single footprint, measuring about two *chi* in length. It is said that when Śākyamuni came from Mount Cuilan (翠藍山), he set foot upon this stone as he landed, leaving the mark that remains visible to this day. Within the imprint lies a shallow pool of water that never dries. People customarily dip their hands into the water to wash their faces and eyes, calling it 'the Buddha's pure water.' To the left stands a Buddhist temple, wherein rests the Śākyamuni Buddha fully reclining , preserved and incorrupt. His couch is

[260] Liu, "When Fantastic Narrative Encounters," 58-59.

> elaborately inlaid with multicolored precious stones and made of aloeswood, radiating magnificent splendor. The temple also houses a relic of the Buddha's tooth and several living *śarīra* (relics). This, indeed, is the very place where Śākyamuni entered nirvāṇa." 錫蘭國馬頭名別羅里，自此泊船登岸陸行此處。海邊山腳光石上有一足跡，長二尺許，云是釋迦自翠藍山來，從此處登岸，腳踏此石，故跡存焉。中有淺水不乾，人皆手蘸其水洗面拭目，曰：「佛水清淨。」左有佛寺，內有釋迦佛混身側臥，尚存不朽。其寢座用各色寶石粧嵌，沉香木為之，甚是華麗，又有佛牙並活舍利子等物在堂。其釋迦涅槃正此處也。[261]

A nearly identical passage appears in *Sanbao*, reframed as a brief dialogue between Huang Fengxian and Jin Bifeng while they sail past these regions without actually setting foot on them. In this exchange, Huang Fengxian describes the Kingdom of Ceylon as possessing "a Buddhist temple that enshrines the original body of Śākyamuni Buddha, reclining there eternally," noting that "its halls and shrines are carved from aloeswood and inlaid with precious stones," and that "the temple also contains two of the Buddha's teeth and several living *śarīra* (relics)." Jin Bifeng supplements this by mentioning "a footprint impressed upon a stone, said to have been left by the Buddha himself," and "a pool of clear water at its center that never dries throughout the seasons that pilgrims use to wash their eyes and faces for lifelong clarity and beauty."[262]

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[261] Ma Huan 馬歡, *Yingya shenglan jiaozhu*, 34-35.

[262] As Huang Fengxian remarks: "Within the Kingdom of Ceylon 別羅里(the local name of its harbor), there stands a Buddhist temple that enshrines the original body of Śākyamuni Buddha, reclining there eternally and remaining incorrupt for ten thousand ages. The halls and shrines are all carved from aloeswood and inlaid with numerous precious stones, exhibiting exquisite craftsmanship. The temple also houses two of the Buddha's teeth and several living *śarīra* (relics). Is this not a site of great antiquity?" 黃鳳仙道：「別羅里有一座佛寺，寺裡有釋伽佛的原身，側著睡在那裡，萬萬年不朽。那些龕堂都是沉香木頭雕刻成的，又且鑲嵌許多寶石，製極精巧。又且有兩個佛牙齒，又且有許多活舍利子。這可就是個古蹟麼？」To this, Jin Bifeng replies: "This is indeed the place where Śākyamuni attained nirvāṇa. In another part of Ceylon's harbor, there is a footprint imprinted upon a stone, said to have been left by the Buddha himself. It measures approximately two *chi* in length and five *cun* in depth, with a pool of clear water collected at its center that remains undried throughout the four seasons. Those who pass by often dip the water to wash their eyes—never suffering from eye disease for the rest of their lives—or to wash their faces, thereby preserving a clear and youthful complexion." 國師道：「這是釋伽佛涅槃之處。別羅里還有一個腳跡在石上，是釋伽佛踏的，約有二尺長，五寸深，中間有一泓清水，四季不乾。大凡過往的人，蘸些來洗眼，一生不害眼；蘸些來洗面，一生不糟面。」See Luo, *Sanbao*, 59:762.

Similarly, *Sanbao*'s description of the Kingdom of Liushan closely parallels the corresponding passage in *Yingyai shenglan*.[263] Comparable correspondences between *Sanbao* and *Yingyai shenglan* appear elsewhere in the novel, including Chapters 34 and 51, where the text continues to appropriate Ma Huan's descriptions of maritime geography and foreign customs.[264] However, within *Sanbao*, both the Kingdoms of Ceylon and Liushan occupy only peripheral positions in the narrative. Each is mentioned briefly—typically in one or two short paragraphs—and serves primarily as a geographical or ethnographic backdrop rather than as a site of significant narrative development.

Overall, *Sanbao* exemplifies a hybrid literary form that combines the structural organization of the literati novel with narrative techniques characteristic of commercial writing. Oral-style narration, playfulness, intertextual borrowing, appropriation, and narrative repetition all point to the novel's participation in the vibrant culture of late-Ming commercial print, where literary ambition and market appeal were closely intertwined. In doing so, the novel blurs the traditional boundary between elite and popular literary forms, transforming documentary and moralistic materials into sources of entertainment and imaginative

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[263] See Ibid., 59:763; Also see Ma, *Yingya shenglan*, 50. For example, the two texts both enumerate eight notable sites: "the first called Shaliu 沙溜; the second, Renbuzhiliu 人不知溜 ('the Flowing Place Unknown to Men'); the third, Chulailiu 處來溜 (the Flowing Place from Which All Comes); the fourth, Maliqiliu 麻里奇溜…," and so forth.

[264] Further textual correspondences between *Sanbao* and *Yingyai shenglan* appear throughout the novel, revealing the author's extensive reliance on Ma Huan's ethnographic and geographical records. In Chapter 34:442-443, *Sanbao*'s portrayal of the Kingdom of Java 爪哇國 and its mythic origins directly echoes Ma Huan's account in *Yingyai shenglan* (Ma Huan, *Yingyai shenglan*, 12). In this episode, Prince Wang explains that the island—once called He-ling 訶陵 during the Tang dynasty and Shepo 闍婆 in the Song—came to be known as Java 爪哇 under the Yuan, while Buddhist texts refer to it as the "Kingdom of the Ghosts"鬼子國. The narrative recounts a mythic tale of a demon progenitor who devoured humans until divine intervention produced a savior figure, paralleling the cosmological and moral explanations found in Ma Huan's travel account. Likewise, the same chapter reproduces Ma Huan's ethnographic description of the island's peculiar custom in which women pray to monkeys for fertility (Ma Huan, *Yingyai shenglan*, 10; *Sanbao*, 34: 443). In both texts, the story describes an aged male monkey who receives offerings of wine, meat, and pastries from women desiring children; if the monkey accepts the offerings and copulates with a female monkey in their presence, the supplicant is believed to conceive—an instance of how *Sanbao* transforms Ma Huan's factual observation into a vivid and exotic narrative scene. Additional parallels appear in Chapter 51, where the episode of the Kingdom of Sumatra 蘇門答剌國 corresponds closely to Ma Huan's account of the same region (Ma Huan, *Yingyai shenglan*, 28; *Sanbao*, 51: 657-658). Here, *Sanbao* recounts a dynastic conflict involving the slain King Xing Le, his widow's public call for a hero to avenge her husband, and a fisherman who fulfills the prophecy, marries the queen, and ascends the throne.

engagement. This hybridity not only reflects the cultural dynamism of late-Ming literary markets but also reveals the author's awareness of fiction's expanding role as both a didactic and commercial medium.

5.4 Textual Promotion and Target Readership: Merchants, Consumers, and the Moral Marketplace

Within the encyclopedias for daily-use, sections such as the Section on Foreign Peoples (*zhuyi men*) or the Section on the Western Barbarians (*xiyi men* 西夷門) usually combined empirical geographical and ethnographic information with marvelous and mythological elements derived from the *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, thereby producing a composite worldview that blurred the boundaries between knowledge and imagination. For instance, in 1614 edition *A Newly Printed and Newly Edited Wanbao Quanshu from the Ye-Shelf Book Collection* (*Xinke Yejia xincai Wanbao quanshu* 新刻鄴架新裁萬寶全書), the Section on Foreign Peoples were arranged in a dual-register format that integrated visual and textual elements (See figure 5.4).[265] The upper register—frequently titled Strange Creatures from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhai yiwu* 山海異物)—introduced sacred or peculiar beasts drawn from ancient myth. The lower register—commonly labeled Miscellaneous Records of Foreign Peoples (*Zhuyi zazhi* 諸夷雜誌) or *Records of Naked Creatures* (*Luochong lu*)—contained ethnographic or fantastical accounts of both real overseas kingdoms, including Korea, Japan, Kingdoms of Champa, Java, and Guli, as well as imaginary realms inspired by mythological geography. This standardized two-column layout

[265] Zhu Dingchen 朱鼎臣, ed. *Xinke Yejia xincai Wanbao quanshu* 新刻鄴架新裁萬寶全書[*A Newly Printed and Newly Edited Wanbao Quanshu from the Ye-Shelf Book Collection*]. In *Mingdai tongsu riyong leishu jikan* 明代通俗日用類書集刊, vol. 11, edited by Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan lishi yanjiusuo wenhuashi 中國社會科學院歷史研究所文化室(Chongqing: Xinan shifan daxue chubanshe, 2011), 32; for a detailed discussion of daily-use encyclopedias (*riyong leishu*) and the *zhuyi men* category, see He, *Home and the World*, 202–244, especially Chapter 4, which examines the publication *Luochong lu*.

juxtaposed mythic creatures with ethnographic descriptions, both constructing a visual and textual interplay between the marvelous and the worldly.

Occasionally, an additional subsection followed, titled Exotic Products and Curiosities of Foreign Peoples (*Zhuyi tuchan yiwu* 諸夷土產異物) or Curious Objects from Foreign Lands (*Waiguo yiwu* 外國異物). These entries catalogued the rare goods, local specialties, and animals purportedly originating from the actual kingdoms of the Western Seas—many of which overlapped with those represented in *Sanbao*, though with differing emphases in their portrayals of local products and commercial items. Such compilations not only served as repositories of global curiosities but also mirrored the growing circulation of material culture and foreign commodities within Ming society, revealing how encyclopedic knowledge intersected with the expanding horizons of trade and imagination.

This section seeks to compare the structural and stylistic techniques shared by *Sanbao* and the aforementioned subsections of daily-use encyclopedias to analyze how the author of *Sanbao* sought to expand the novel's readership through adopting a hybrid writing strategy. Through their standardized formats, compilatory practices, and reprinted materials, the "Sections on Foreign Peoples" reflected and reinforced the contemporary public's fascination with the marvelous, their curiosity about foreign wonders, and their participation in an increasingly globalized imagination of the world.[266] The following analysis will also examine how *Sanbao* may have adopted a similarly hybrid mode of literary and commercial adaptation—integrating the moral and structural framework of the literati novel with the market-oriented aesthetics of popular print culture. By incorporating mythic representations of foreign lands, peoples, and objects, *Sanbao* engages not only the intellectual interests of

[266] See also He, *Home and the World*, chapter. 4, on the *zhuyi men* sections and late-Ming readers' engagement with foreign knowledge.

scholar-official readers but also the imaginative, visual, and affective sensibilities of a broader readership.



Figure 5.4: "Section on the Western Barbarians" 西夷門, in *A Newly Printed and Newly Edited Wanbao Quanshu from the Ye-Shelf Book Collection* (1614), 32.

According to Hsu, late-Ming encyclopedias broke down the fixed cultural and textual boundaries characteristic of earlier daily-use encyclopedias. For example, the Yuan-dynasty *Shilin guangji* generally separated actual foreign polities from the mythical countries and strange beings described in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, or relegated such fantastic realms to the geographical periphery. Late-Ming encyclopedias, by contrast, placed real and imaginary lands side by side, creating a new relationship between archaic geographical imaginaries and the more concrete, experience-based geographical knowledge accumulated during the Yuan and Ming periods.[267] My examination of *Newly Printed Extracts from Various Books for the Convenient Use of Scholars and Commoners—Handling All Matters Without Asking Others* reveals a similar classificatory logic. In this Wanli-period

[267] Hsu, "Imagined Imperial Tribute," 16, 39.

encyclopedia (see Figures 5.5–5.7), entries such as the One-Armed Kingdom (*yi bi guo* 一臂國), the Pierced-Chest Kingdom (*chuan xiong guo* 穿胸國), and the Kingdom of Java (*zhaowa guo* 爪哇國) are placed within the same classificatory framework.[268] This arrangement exemplifies the classificatory logic identified by Hsu.

This study, however, takes a different perspective. Rather than concentrating on the merging of geographic imaginaries, I examine the subsections that sometimes follow the Section on Foreign Peoples entries—namely Exotic Products and Curiosities of Foreign Peoples (*Zhuyi tuchan yiwu* 諸夷土產異物) and Curious Objects from Foreign Lands (*Waiguo yiwu* 外國異物). These subsections, I argue, reveal a parallel mode of commercialized representation that directly resonates with the tribute-list format in fictional works such as *Sanbao*. Typically, these encyclopedic entries begin with a heading naming a real polity and then proceed to enumerate its local products, often accompanied by concise yet vivid descriptions of their material or sensory qualities.

By analyzing this structure alongside *Sanbao*'s tribute lists, I suggest that the novel's mode of cataloguing foreign tribute aligns with the descriptive and classificatory strategies of daily-use encyclopedias and thus reflects the influence of late-Ming commercial print culture. This correspondence indicates not only a shared aesthetic of material exoticism but also a shared interest in commodifying the foreign through standardized, easily consumable lists.

[268] Chen, ed. *Xinke qunshu zhaiyao shimin*, 468-470.

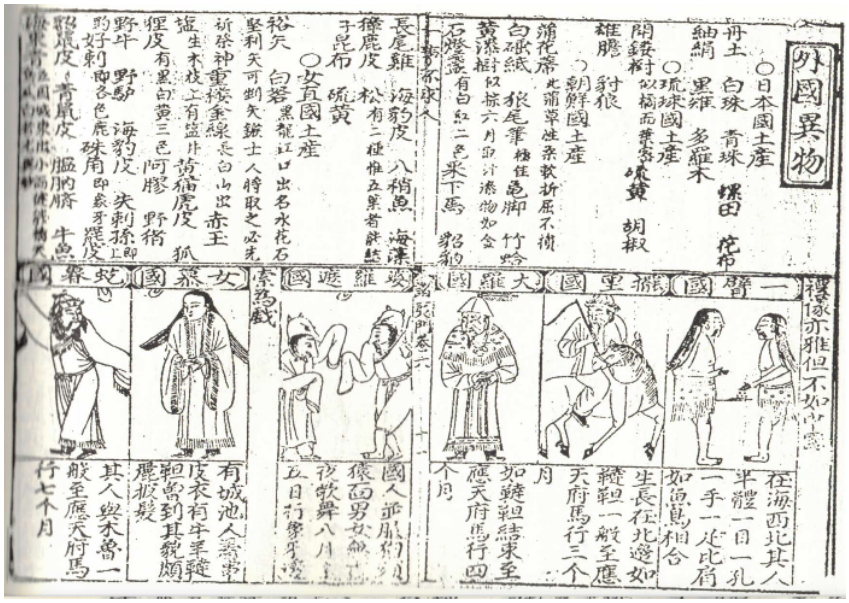


Figure 5.5: “Curious Objects from Foreign Lands” 外國異物, in *Newly Printed Extracts from Various Books for the Convenient Use of Scholars and Commoners*, 468.

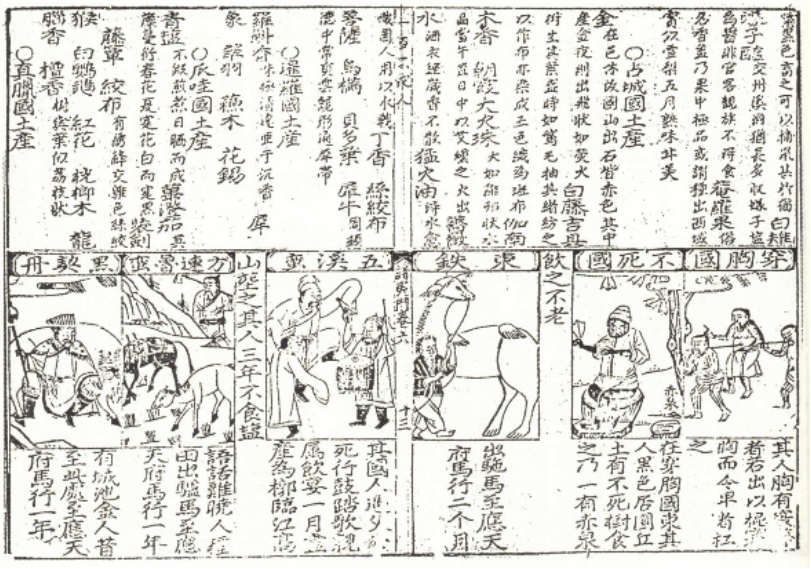


Figure 5.6: “Curious Objects from Foreign Lands,” in *Newly Printed Extracts from Various Books for the Convenient Use of Scholars and Commoners*, 469.

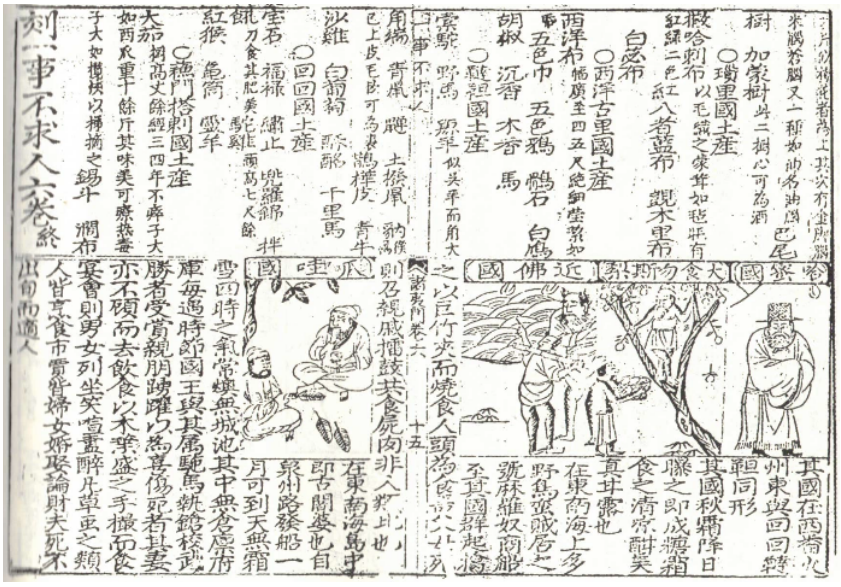


Figure 5.7: “Curious Objects from Foreign Lands,” in *Newly Printed Extracts from Various Books for the Convenient Use of Scholars and Commoners*, 470.

As illustrated above, such encyclopedic entries typically begin with a heading identifying a recognizable foreign polity, followed by a systematic enumeration of its indigenous products. These items are frequently described in succinct but striking terms that emphasize their sensory or cultural appeal. For example, as shown in Figure 5.7, the section following the entry for the “Kingdom of Guli of the Western Seas”—a place-name also appearing in *Sanbao* and in historical sources such as *Yingyai shenglan*—includes items such as: (a) Western Sea cloth (*xiyang bu* 西洋布), described in terms of its extraordinary dimensions and soft, delicate texture; (b) five-colored kerchiefs (*wuse jin* 五色巾); (c) five-colored crows (*wuse ya* 五色鴉); (d) falcon-stone (*gu shi* 鶻石); (e) white doves (*bai jiu* 白鳩); (f) pepper (*hu jiao* 胡椒); (g) agarwood (*chen xiang* 沉香); (h) costus root (*mu xiang* 木香); and (i) horses (*ma* 馬). This organizational format—pairing a territorial heading with a sequential list of tribute items, sometimes enriched through brief ethnographic or material descriptions—closely parallels the structure employed in *Sanbao*’s own tribute lists.

For example, in *Sanbao*, when the King of Guli submits to the Ming envoy, the narrative records his presentation of tribute in the following terms:

> Four pieces each of five-colored jade; one *ma-jia* pearl (azure in color, and so named because each is valued equivalently to a fine horse); one gold-inlaid belt (containing fifty taels of pure gold, drawn by foreign artisans into filaments as fine as hair, woven into sheets, and inlaid with multicolored gemstones to form the belt); one *cao shang fei* ('Grass-Soaring') beast (a creature said to be roughly the size of a dog, its body patterned like that of a tortoiseshell cat; exceptionally gentle in nature, yet whenever vicious animals such as lions or elephants encounter it, they immediately prostrate themselves upon the ground—thus it is regarded as the king of beasts); one black donkey (capable of traveling a thousand *li* per day, adept at fighting tigers, and able to kill a tiger with a single kick); one hundred bolts of *hujin* brocade (of the finest quality, woven in five-colored patterns); five hundred bolts of *huarui* cloth (a textile woven from flower stamens); and ten caskets of *yunhui* (a fragrant herb, white as jade and resistant to decay even when buried; during the Tang dynasty, Yuan Zai is said to have crushed it to plaster the walls of his residence, thereafter known as the Yunhui Hall)." 五色玉各四片，馬價珠一枚（青色，每一枚價與名馬價相值，故名），金廂帶一條（赤金五十兩，番匠抽如髮細，縷之成片，鑲嵌各色寶石成帶），草上飛一隻（獸名，形大如犬，渾身似玳瑁斑貓之樣，性最純善，惟獅象等惡獸見之，即伏於地下，此乃獸中之王也），黑驢一頭（日行千里，善鬥虎，一蹄而虎斃），胡錦百端（最精，紋成五彩），花蕊布五百匹（以花蕊織成者），薝輝十廂（香草也，色白如玉，入土不朽，唐元載碎之以塗壁，號薝輝堂）[269]

Although the items depicted in *Sanbao* do not correspond directly to those recorded in the daily-use encyclopedias discussed above, the underlying similarities in form and narrative technique remain striking. Despite belonging to distinct genres—a daily-use encyclopedia and a vernacular fiction with a literati novel's structural scaffolding—both engage in

[269] Luo, *Sanbao*, 61: 792.

comparable modes of cataloguing that merge classificatory order with imaginative appeal. This hybridity, which combines the moral and structural framework of the literati novel with the commercial sensibilities of popular print culture, may be understood as a deliberate strategy aimed at expanding the text's readership.

Recent scholarship by Lu Yilu has identified a similar dual commercial strategy in the works of Hu Wenhuan 胡文煥 (ca. 1558–ca. 1617), a traditional Confucian intellectual whose civil-service ambitions ultimately failed. During the Wanli reign, Hu published *Shanhai tujing* 山海圖經 and *Record of Naked Creatures* (*Luochong lu*), both of which were frequently included in the Section on Foreign Peoples of daily-use encyclopedias. In these works, Hu appears to foreground mythical and auspicious creatures that symbolize the virtuous or hegemonic ruler, imperial virtue, and the idealized polity of the Kingdom of Gentlemen (*Junzi guo* 君子國). As Lu observes, this strategy enabled Hu to appeal to and consolidate an elite literati readership. Yet while the educated class might have been drawn to the works' moral allegories and didactic implications, a broader reading public—less invested in the Neo-Confucian project of the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge)—was likely captivated instead by their vivid portrayals of exotic marvels and strange curiosities. For such readers, depictions of extraordinary beings, rare artifacts, and foreign customs met a growing commercial demand for texts that combined wonder, entertainment, and the promise of practical or magical efficacy, including therapeutic uses.[270]

Sanbao adopted a comparable hybrid strategy. By integrating mythic depictions of foreign lands, peoples, and objects into a narrative framework shaped by literati moral and structural concerns, the novel simultaneously aligns itself with elite scholarly traditions and engages the imaginative tastes of a broader popular readership. Its descriptive passages on

[270] Lu, *Yiyu, yiren, yishou*, 58.

exotic locales, precious commodities, and fantastical creatures echo the entries found in daily-use encyclopedias—texts that seamlessly combined practical knowledge with imaginative visions of the distant and the marvelous, thereby attracting a wide range of readers.

Furthermore, the conceptual linkage between foreign items and tribute lists—particularly when such items are positioned immediately after the Section on Foreign Peoples entries—illustrates the dual appeal these works offered. On the one hand, they appealed to literati readers whose fascination with foreign lands was accompanied by anxieties about how expanding geographic and political knowledge challenged established Sinocentric conceptions of world order. On the other hand, they catered to merchants, wealthy buyers, and other commoner readers fascinated by and financially capable of pursuing exotic foreign goods. By adopting and adapting the stylistic conventions, structural features, and market-oriented strategies of these commercially successful encyclopedic texts, *Sanbao* participates in the dynamic interplay between elite moral instruction and popular entertainment that characterized the vibrant print culture of the late-Ming period.

5.5 Conclusion: *Sanbao* as a Hybrid Genre

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that *Sanbao* occupies a distinctly hybrid position within the late-Ming literary and commercial landscape—one that cannot be neatly classified as either a literati novel or a product of the popular commercial book market. Luo Maodeng draws upon the formal rigor, symmetrical design, and ideological ambitions of the literati tradition, even as he fully participates in the commercialized publishing world centered around Jinling Fuchun Hall. Luo's close partnership with Fuchun Hall attests to his deep integration into Nanjing's commercial book market, and this affiliation helps explain the dual character of *Sanbao's* textual practices. On one hand, the novel adopts stylistic features associated with popular commercial writing—such as vernacularized narration, playful

exaggeration, and flexible modes of intertextual borrowing. On the other hand, it also participates in what scholars identify as "hucksterish" modes of production, including conspicuous repetition, uneven quality, and the unembarrassed reuse or reconfiguration of earlier textual materials. Together, these traits align *Sanbao* with the broader commercial print culture of the late Ming, even as its structural rigor and ideological ambitions evoke the literati novel tradition.

At the same time, *Sanbao*'s sustained dialogue with daily-use encyclopedias, especially their "Foreign Peoples," "Barbarians," and "Curious Objects from Foreign Lands" sections, illustrates how the novel appropriates classificatory and catalogue-like techniques to shape readerly expectations and broaden its appeal beyond elite audiences. By transforming tribute-list formats and exotic commodity catalogues into narrative devices, the text engages both literati readers concerned with political legitimacy and commoner readers captivated by material abundance and global curiosities. In doing so, *Sanbao* not only reflects but actively constructs a late-Ming "moral marketplace," where geography, governance, commerce, and imagination converge. Ultimately, this hybrid mode reveals how late-Ming fiction such as *Sanbao* functioned as a site of negotiation between didactic intention and commercial strategy, between elite literary ambition and the tastes of a rapidly expanding reading public.

CHAPTER VI

VISUAL MARKETING: RELIGIOUS ILLUSTRATION AND COMMERCIAL STRATEGY IN *SANBAO*

This chapter examines the illustrations of the Wanli edition of *Sanbao* and their role in shaping the work's commercial life within the late-Ming printing industry, with particular attention to their relationship to the Jinling (Nanjing) publishing tradition. It argues that the novel's finely crafted images functioned not merely as visual supplements to the text but as marketing tools designed to attract a broad and heterogeneous readership. This promotional function operated primarily through two visual strategies: the inclusive deployment of Buddhist and Daoist imagery, and the repeated visual affirmation of Ming imperial authority. At the same time, the illustrations bear material traces of commercial production, including the reuse of standardized templates, carving and textual errors, recycled imagery, and visual narratives that diverge from or simplify the textual account. Taken together, these features demonstrate how market pressures shaped *Sanbao*'s visual program, transforming illustration into both a promotional device and an interpretive force.

The commercial orientation of the Wanli edition is already evident in its bibliographic presentation. The extant edition circulates under the full title *Xinke quanxiang Sanbao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi* 新刻全像三寶太監西洋記通俗演義, in which the designation *xinke quanxiang* ("newly carved and fully illustrated") operates less as a bibliographic guarantee of textual novelty than as a promotional claim designed to enhance market appeal.[271] As

[271] See Chang, *Sanbao taijian xia xiyang ji yanjiu*, 7-11; see also Luo, *Xinke quanxiang Sanbao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi,* Harvard College Library Harvard-Yenching Library and National Archives of Japan Digital Archive.

scholars of late-Ming print culture have shown, illustrations produced by commercial presses in major publishing centers such as Jinling, Jianyang, and Haicheng were frequently mobilized as visually conspicuous markers of value in an increasingly competitive book market. Lucille Chia has observed that in the highly competitive publishing market of late-Ming Nanjing, commercial printers increasingly foregrounded illustration as a means of enhancing a book's visual presence and consumer appeal.[272] Craig Clunas similarly notes that the explicit labeling of a work as "fully illustrated" often functioned as a marker of desirability, while the absence of such a designation could signal anxieties about refinement, taste, and intended readership.[273] Katherine Carlitz further argues that terms such as *xinke* frequently indexed commercial positioning rather than substantive textual revision, serving primarily to attract consumers' attention.[274] Within this context, illustration should be understood not as a supplementary embellishment but as an integral component of a book's commercial identity. Designed to signal genre, promise spectacle, and differentiate a title within a crowded marketplace, illustrations functioned as visual advertisements that shaped readers' expectations even prior to textual engagement.

The commercial logic embedded in *Sanbao*'s production is further illuminated by the circumstances of its publication. Except for the author's ties to the late-Ming Jinling commercial publishing networks, as discussed in the previous chapter, the Wanli edition's front matter likewise exemplifies this marketing dynamic. It features a finely executed religious illustration that projects aesthetic refinement and spiritual authority, even as it stands in sharp contrast to the numerous errors found in the accompanying illustration titles and paired inscriptions. This incongruity underscores both the promotional centrality of

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[272] Chia, *Printing for Profit*, 205.
[273] Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 34-35.
[274] Katherine Carlitz, "Printing as Performance: Literati Playwright-Publishers of The Late Ming," In *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, edited by Kai-Wing Chow and Cynthia J Brokaw (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 281.

illustration and the uneven production standards characteristic of late-Ming commercial printing. At the same time, *Sanbao*'s illustrations do not simply replicate established Jinling conventions but adapt them selectively.

It is within this commercial and regional framework that the Wanli edition of *Sanbao* should be understood. By situating its illustrations within the context of Jinling publishing practices, this chapter adopts a comparative approach to examining how the novel's visual program both aligns with and reconfigures local print conventions. The chapter proceeds in three sections. The first situates the Wanli edition's illustrations within the broader Jinling publishing milieu, with particular attention to visual practices associated with the Tang family's Jinling Fuchun Hall, in order to identify both points of convergence and sites of adaptation. The second examines how *Sanbao*'s illustrations functioned as a form of visual advertisement through two interrelated strategies: religious inclusivity—specifically the consistently positive and non-competitive portrayal of both Buddhism and Daoism—and the repeated visual affirmation of Ming imperial authority. The third turns to the material traces of rapid, profit-driven production embedded within the illustrations themselves, including repetitive compositional templates, carving and textual errors, the reuse of pre-existing woodblocks, and visual narratives that diverge from or simplify the textual account. Together, these analyses demonstrate how illustration in the Wanli edition of *Sanbao* operated at the intersection of commerce, ideology, and interpretation, revealing the extent to which market forces shaped both the visual and narrative dimensions of the work.

6.1 Visual Format and Print Strategy: *Sanbao*'s Illustrations in the Context of Jinling Commercial Publishing

Building on the previous discussion, this section examines the visual format and print strategy of *Sanbao* by situating its illustrations within the broader field of Jinling commercial

publishing. Rather than approaching *Sanbao*'s visual program primarily through claims of innovation or departure, I read its illustrations as one configuration among several that emerged from late-Ming Jinling workshop practices, market expectations, and established conventions of illustrated fiction. From this perspective, *Sanbao*'s visual format reflects both its participation in, and its particular articulation of, prevailing Jinling approaches to illustration, layout, and commercial appeal.

The Wanli-period edition of *Sanbao* explicitly foregrounds illustration through the designation "full-page illustration" (*quanxiang* 全像) in its title, a labeling practice commonly employed by Jinling publishers to signal the presence of extensive visual material. Such terms as "illustrated" (*chuxiang* 出像／出相) and "full-page illustrated" (*quanxiang* 全像／全相) were widely used in late-Ming commercial publishing to attract readers attuned to visual spectacle and to distinguish illustrated works within an increasingly competitive book market.[275] In this respect, *Sanbao* aligns closely with Jinling commercial strategies that treated illustration not merely as narrative accompaniment but as an integral component of a book's marketability.

Within this shared commercial framework, however, *Sanbao* exhibits a particularly sustained reliance on illustration across its narrative structure. The novel comprises twenty *juan* and one hundred chapters; each *juan* contains five chapters and typically includes ten illustrations, most of which are presented as full double-page spreads. In most cases, each chapter is accompanied by two illustrations, resulting in a consistently high image-to-text ratio throughout the work. Moreover, each illustration is accompanied by a small inscription placed in the upper margin on the right-hand page, and the paired full-page images together constitute a single composite illustration. The inscriptions on the right and left pages function

[275] Chen, *Ming dai shufang zhi yanjiu*, 8.

as a coordinated set, framing the double-page spread as an integrated visual unit rather than two independent images. (See Figure 6.4).

To situate this visual density more precisely, a brief comparison with other dramatic works published in Jinling is instructive. *Xinke chuxiang yinzhu Guanyin xiuxing Xiangshan ji* 新刻出像音註觀世音修行香山記, another work by Luo Maodeng published by Fuchun Hall, includes fifteen illustrations across thirty acts, while *Nandiao Xixiang ji* 南調西廂記, also published by Fuchun Hall, contains sixteen illustrations for thirty-six acts, all rendered as single-page images with valance-style captions (Figure 6.1 and 6.2).[276] *Pei Du Xiangshan huandai ji* 裴度香山還帶記, another play issued by the Jinling Tang family's Shide Hall 世德堂, similarly features twenty-two illustrations across forty-one acts, likewise presented as single-page compositions (Figure 6.3).[277] In these works, illustrations punctuate the text at measured intervals. By contrast, the illustrations in *Sanbao* appear at regular intervals, creating a continuous visual presence. This density suggests not an exceptional departure from Jinling publishing practices, but rather a specific calibration of visual emphasis within commercial norms—shaped by workshop capacity, reader expectation, and the demands of a long, episodic narrative.

To clarify the parameters of these commercial norms, it is useful to consider broader Jinling publishing conventions as points of reference. As Chen Zhaozhen has noted, Jianyang editions typically employ a two-register layout— "image above, text below"—with images compressed in scale.[278] Jinling editions, by contrast, more often feature large single-page illustrations or, less frequently, double-page spreads, rendered with relatively bold linework.

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[276] *Xinke chuxiang yinzhu Guanyin xiuxing Xiangshan ji* 新刻出像音註觀世音修行香山記, in *Guben xiqu congkan* (GBXQCK)古本戲曲叢刊, 2nd Series (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1955); also see *Nandiao Xixiang ji* 南調西廂記, in GBXQCK, 1st series (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1954).
[277] *Pei Du Xiangshan huandai ji* 裴度香山還帶記, in GBXQCK, 1st series.
[278] Chen, *Min dai shufang zhi yanjiu*, 8.

Many publications produced by the Tang family's Jinling Fuchun Hall further incorporate distinctive ornamental features, including crenellated (*zhidie* 雉堞) decorative columns that replace conventional ruled borders with floral motifs.[279] Such page-frame ornamentation appears in several Fuchun Hall publications, including Luo Maodeng's *Xiangshan ji* and the *Nandiao Xixiang ji* (See Figures 6.1 and 6.2).

Against this background, *Sanbao* appears to prioritize certain visual strategies over others. Although it relies heavily on large-format imagery, the Wanli edition does not adopt the crenellated borders found in many Fuchun Hall publications. However, even in works that employ such decorative frames, they are generally confined to pages of text rather than used to enclose illustrations. *Sanbao* directs visual attention not through elaborate border ornamentation but through the scale, frequency, and prominence of its images (See Figures 6.5). This configuration reflects a Jinling commercial practice, in which visual impact could be achieved through multiple means without uniform adoption of all available ornamental conventions.

Another widely shared feature of Jinling commercial illustrations is the use of conspicuous caption spaces. As Hsiao Li-ling has shown, many late-Ming illustrated plays and religious narratives employ valance-type captions—horizontal cartouches positioned at the top of the image that recall the visual rhetoric of theatrical stage valances. Such captions often frame scenes as opening tableaux (*kaichang* 開場) and function commercially to orient readers quickly while foregrounding spectacle and performative immediacy. This format appears frequently in publications associated with Jinling Fuchun Hall, including Luo's *Xiangshan ji* (Figure 6.1).[280]

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[279] Ibid., 8.
[280] Li-ling Xiao, *The Eternal Present of the Past: Illustration, Theatre, and Reading in the Wanli Period, 1573-1619* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 90, 263, 267.

Sanbao, however, does not consistently adopt this theatrical captioning format. Its illustrations do not include formal opening tableaux (*kaichang*), nor do captions typically appear as large cartouches centered at the top of the image. Instead, *Sanbao* employs smaller caption-like inscriptions placed in the upper right margin (Figure 6.4). This placement aligns with existing caption practices while adjusting their visual prominence, suggesting a reorientation of emphasis rather than a rejection of established conventions. A further distinction within this framework is *Sanbao*'s systematic pairing of inscriptions across its double-page illustrations. In most cases, each page carries a line of text, often arranged as a couplet. These inscriptions may describe the depicted scene, offer evaluative commentary, or introduce narrative cues that do not simply replicate the prose narration. As the following section will demonstrate, these paired inscriptions often shape readers' interpretive trajectories, sometimes redirecting attention or reconfiguring narrative emphasis. Within Jinling commercial publishing, such inscriptional practices can be understood as one means of integrating visual spectacle with textual refinement.

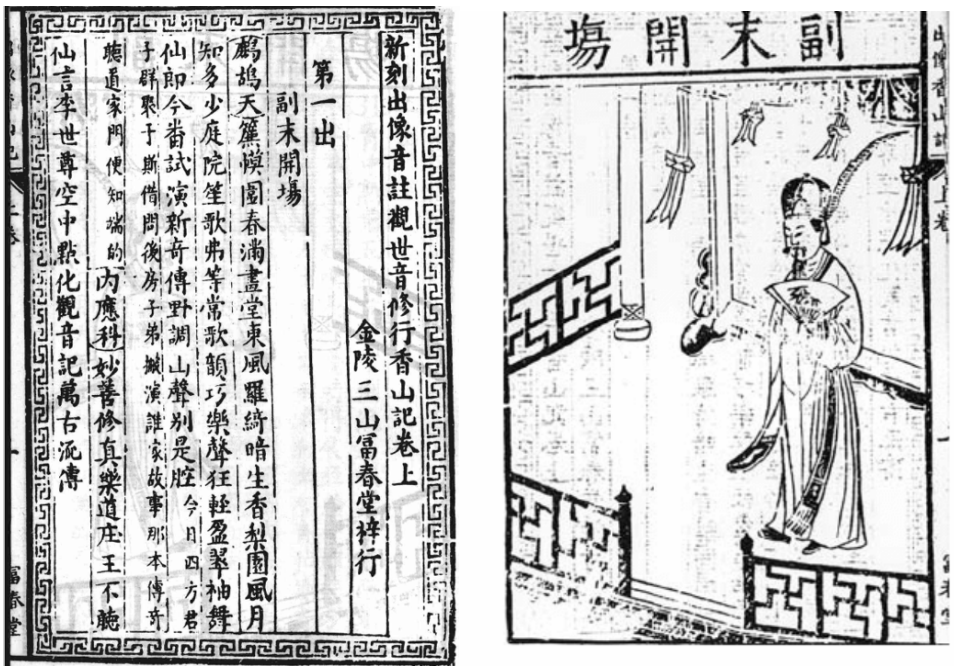


Figure 6.1(From left to right): *Xiangshan ji*, published by Jinling: Fuchun Tang, 1573– 1619. Reproduced from GBXQCK, 2nd series, 1.1a-1b.

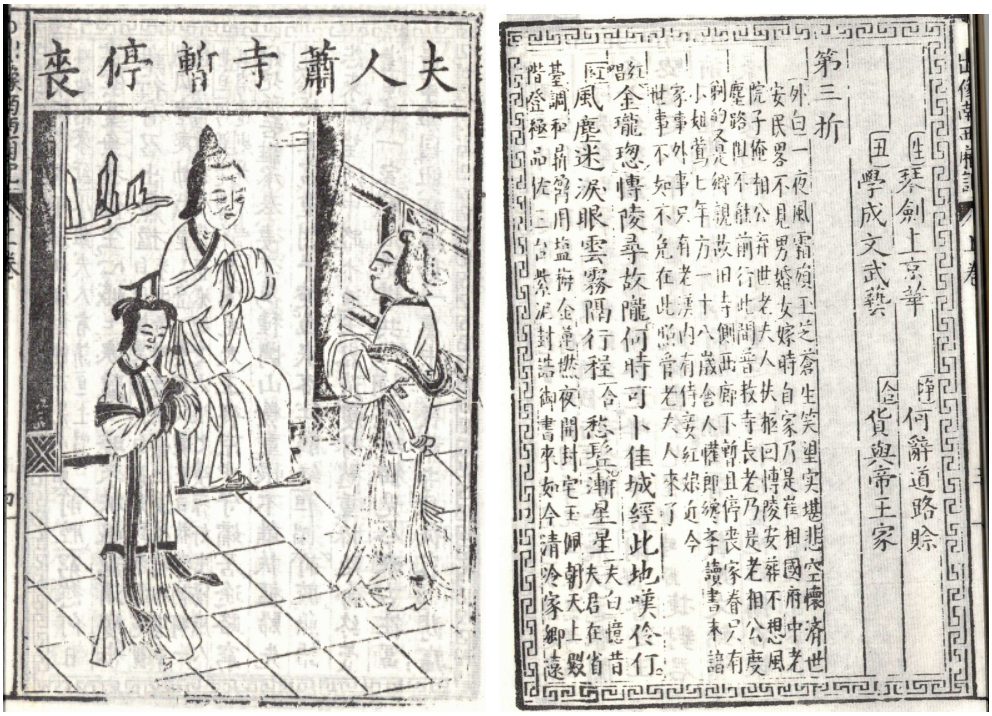


Figure 6.2: *Nandiao Xixiang ji*, published by Jinling: Fuchun Tang. Reproduced from GBXQCK, 1st series, 3.3b-4a.



Figure 6.3: *Xiangshan huandai ji*, published by Jinling: Shide Hall. Reproduced from GBXQCK, 1st series, 1.2a.

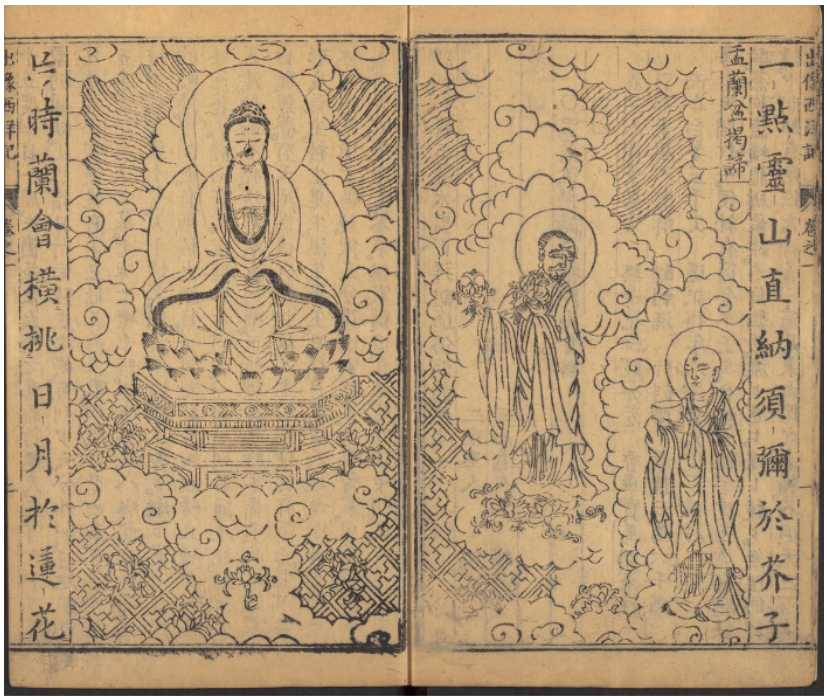


Figure 6.4: *Sanbao*, *juan* 1, 1.1b-2a. Harvard Library

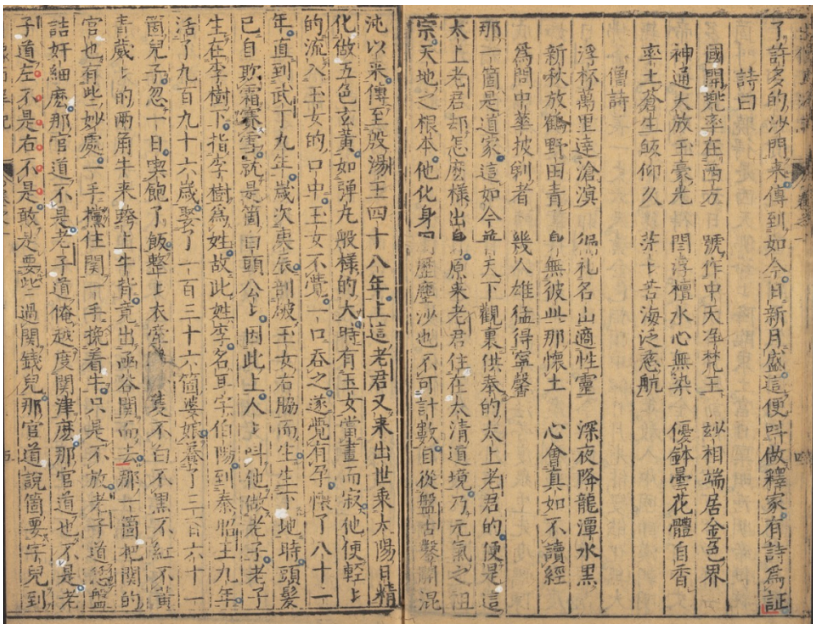


Figure 6.5: *Sanbao*, *juan* 1, 1.4b-5a

By comparison, *Sanbao*'s dense and expansive visual program represents one end of the range of illustrative practice within Jinling commercial publishing. Its frequent double-

page images, combined with paired inscriptions, establish a mode of reading in which visual and textual elements operate in sustained interaction. Rather than functioning solely as occasional highlights or advertisements, illustrations in *Sanbao* become a recurring and integral component of the reading experience. Although their content does not always correspond directly to the accompanying text, their sustained presence throughout the work encourages readers to engage with the novel through both visual and textual modes, making illustration a constitutive element of the book's overall form.

At the same time, this visual abundance underscores *Sanbao*'s orientation toward the commercial marketplace, where spectacle, immediacy, and visual pleasure constituted key selling points. The paired inscriptions, however, introduce an additional layer of mediation. By coupling large-format images with concise, often allusive textual commentary, *Sanbao* accommodates multiple modes of readership—appealing to audiences drawn to visual richness while also invoking literati-style refinement. Within the context of Jinling commercial publishing, *Sanbao*'s illustrations operate not as isolated innovations but as a particular configuration through which commercial appeal and textual cultivation are held in productive tension.

6.2 Literati and Commercial Readership: Religious and Political Imagery in the Marketplace

As noted above, the illustrations in *Sanbao* can be broadly categorized into two principal thematic groups: those that foreground religious content—specifically Buddhism and Daoism—and those that affirm Ming imperial authority. These two subjects appear to serve as visual strategies intended to attract a diverse readership, including potential buyers with different intellectual interests or aesthetic preferences. The commercial dimension of this strategy becomes particularly apparent when we observe that the illustrations, unlike the

narrative text, tend to portray Buddhism and Daoism not in competition, but in mutually positive terms.

A revealing example appears in Figure 6.6, titled “Buddhist and Daoist adepts engaged in a contest of magical prowess” 僧[miscarved as 曾]道兩班賭勝負. This illustration corresponds to the episode in chapter 12 in which the Buddhist monk Jin Bifeng and the Daoist Celestial Master Zhang engage in a supernatural contest. However, the accompanying paired verse—“Buddhism’s boundless radiance yields jade-like branches, each inch a precious marvel; Daoism transcends the visible world, and even the fragments struck from its altar emanate fragrance” (佛廣無邊截瓊枝寸寸是寶；道超有象析壇特片片皆香)—makes clear that the illustration does not depict the narrative outcome in which Jin Bifeng ultimately wins. Rather than emphasizing rivalry, the verse collectively praises the miraculous capacities of both Buddhist and Daoist traditions. This divergence between text and image suggests a conscious commercial strategy: by elevating Buddhism and Daoism in parallel, the illustrations appeal simultaneously to devotees of both traditions, thereby broadening the work’s potential market within the competitive late-Ming print economy.

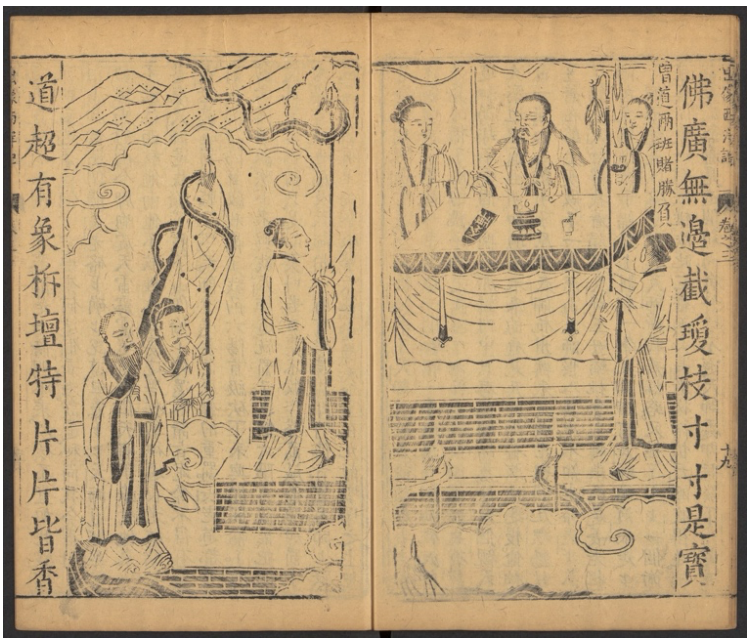


Figure 6.6: *Sanbao*, *juan* 3, 12.19b-20a

If the religious-themed illustrations aim to attract readers through inclusiveness, the second major group—the affirmation of Ming imperial authority—operates through visual repetition and ideological clarity. When the Ming fleet sets out on its maritime expeditions to the Western Seas, the illustrations consistently depict foreign peoples kneeling before Ming envoys. These images visually proclaim the dynasty's successful assertion of authority over distant kingdoms. For example, Figures 6.7–6.8 bear titles such as "The Kingdom of Golden Lotus and Treasure Elephant Submits" (金蓮寶象國服降) and "The King of Bintonglong Offers Tribute in Deference" (賓童龍國王納疑). Each portrays foreign emissaries kneeling before representatives of the Ming military, thereby dramatizing acts of surrender and reaffirming the righteous extension of Ming imperial power. Through their formulaic repetition, such images cultivate a visual rhetoric of unquestioned authority and universal submission.



Figure 6.7: *Sanbao*, *juan* 7, 32. 14b-15a.

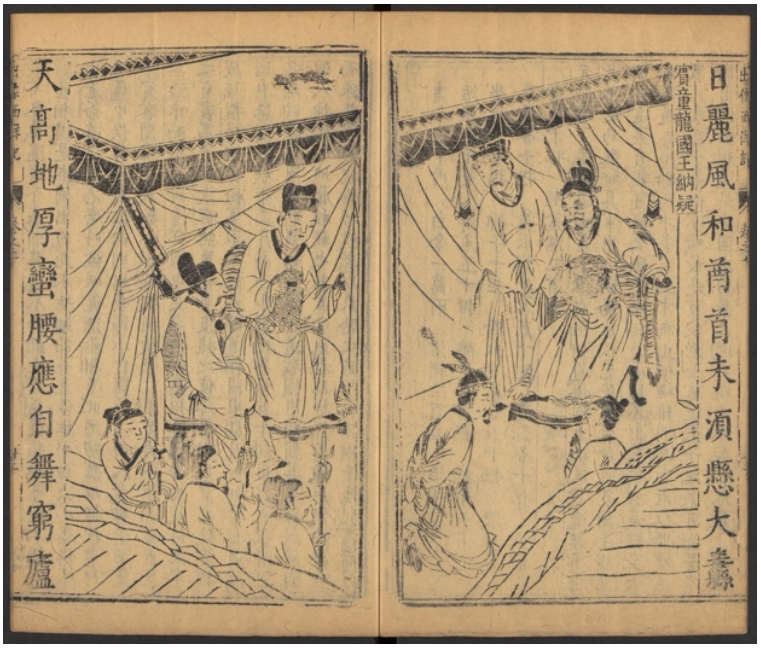


Figure 6.8: *Sanbao*, *juan* 7, 32. 21b-22a.

Building on this theme, several illustrations further expand the scope of imperial authority beyond the human realm by depicting scenes in which animal spirits voluntarily submit or request ritual recognition from the Ming state. These images imply that Ming sovereignty operates cosmologically, exerting influence even over numinous creatures. For instance, Figure 6.9 includes the caption "The Azure-Water Spirit Fish Raises Its Head in Obedience to the Imperial Army" (碧水神魚翹首王師應效順), depicting the fish spirit's willing submission. Figure 6.10, titled "The White Eel King Requests Ritual Recognition" (白鱔王來求祭祀), is accompanied by the line "The imperial house, following established precedent, grants it an exalted ritual offering to be perpetuated in transmission" (皇家載典禮隆祠祀以相傳). Together, these illustrations underscore an ideological message: Ming authority is not merely political or territorial but cosmic, acknowledged across realms seen and unseen.

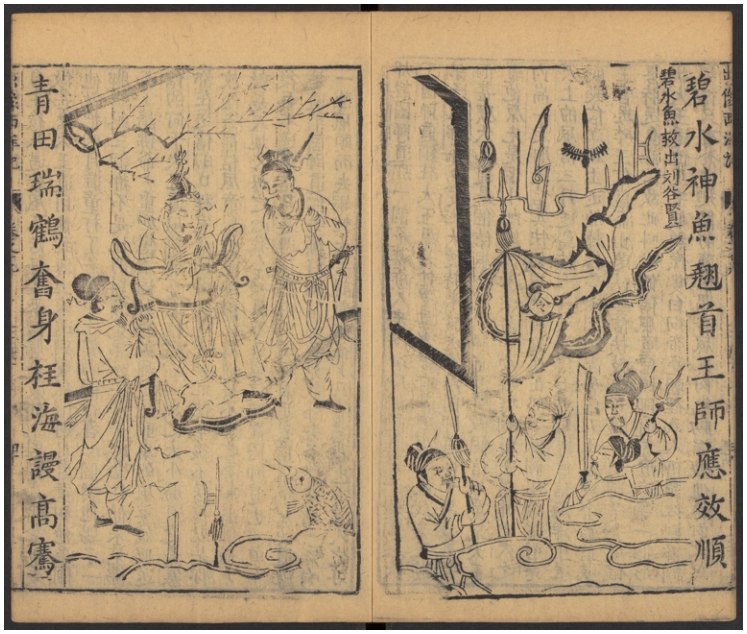


Figure 6.9: *Sanbao*, *juan* 19, 94. 39b-40a.

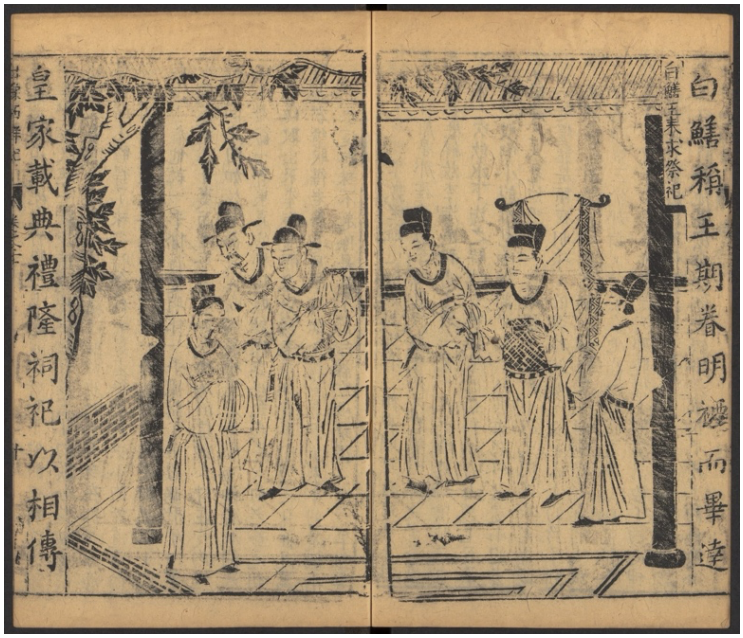


Figure 6.10: *Sanbao*, *juan* 20, 97. 19b-20a.

This emphasis on imperial supremacy becomes even more pronounced in illustrations depicting encounters between the Ming emperor and religious figures. In these scenes, the images diverge sharply from the more nuanced relationships articulated in the narrative text and instead advance a singular interpretive position: Ming imperial authority unequivocally

supersedes both Buddhist and Daoist power. Figure 6.11 offers a particularly vivid example of this dynamic.

In the textual account, the encounter between Jin Bifeng and the Yongle Emperor is characterized by a carefully balanced decorum and mutual recognition, even allowing space for Jin's pride and occasional rudeness. As chapter 14 of *Sanbao* relates,

> The elder [Jin Bifeng] entered the court with the same unrestrained confidence as before. When he came before the emperor, he did not perform the prescribed gestures of ritual obeisance; instead, he offered only a cursory greeting, lifting his hand briefly in acknowledgment. The court's treatment of him had changed markedly since their initial meeting: he was now accorded considerable respect, escorted into the Hall of Golden Radiance, and granted an embroidered seat. 那長老照舊時大搖大擺，擺將進朝，見了聖駕，也不行禮，只是打個問訊，把個手兒略節舉了一舉。朝廷待他比初見時老大不同，著實是十分敬重他了，請到金鑾殿上，賜他一個繡墩坐下.[281]

By contrast, the illustration renders Jin Bifeng kneeling deferentially before the imperial throne, visually depicting him as an ordinary monk presenting tribute. This pictorial staging suppresses the textual ambiguity surrounding ritual decorum and replaces it with an unambiguous hierarchy, asserting that religious authority—embodied by Jin Bifeng—occupies a clearly subordinate position beneath imperial power.

[281] Luo, *Sanbao*, 14: 178.



Figure 6.11: *Sanbao*, *juan* 3, 15. 50b-51a.

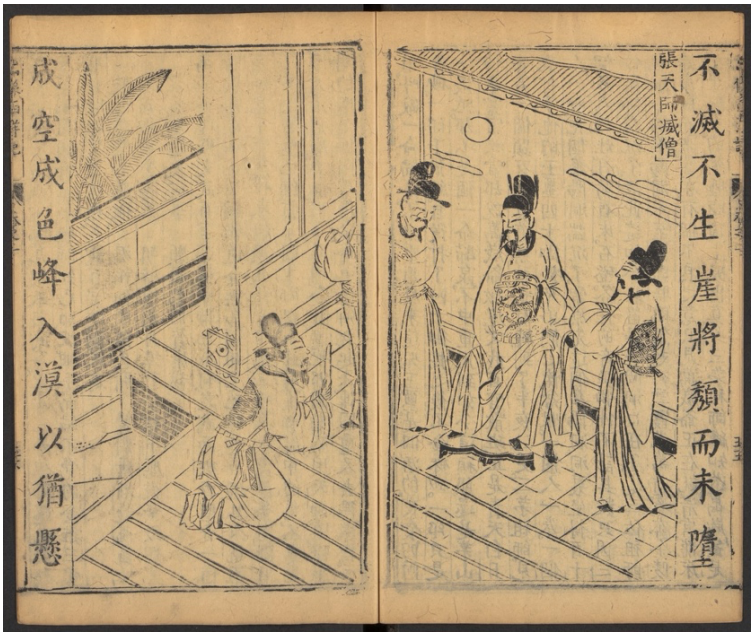


Figure 6.12: *Sanbao*, *juan* 2, 10. 55b-56a.

A similar visual logic appears in Figure 6.12, where Celestial Master Zhang is depicted not only kneeling before the emperor but also wearing the robes of a civil official rather than a Daoist priest's attire. While his kneeling posture aligns with the textual narrative, the choice to represent him in official garments is striking and invites interpretation. On one level, this

may reflect a pragmatic commercial practice, such as the reuse of an existing woodblock image. On another level, it may articulate a more pointed ideological claim: that Daoism, as a religion of Chinese origin, was institutionally intertwined with—and ultimately subsumed under—the authority of the Ming state. In both possibilities, the illustration reinforces the overarching visual argument that imperial authority eclipses religious authority within the symbolic universe constructed by *Sanbao*'s woodblock images.

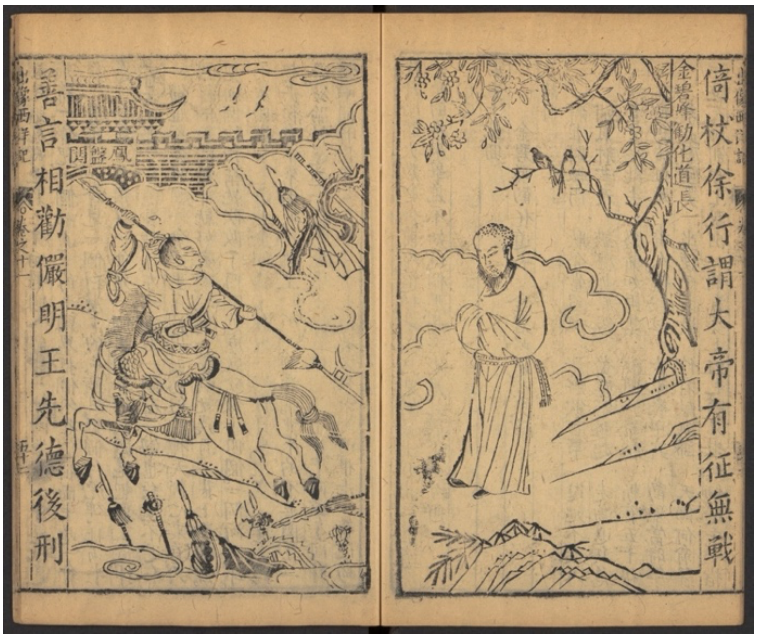


Figure 6.13: *Sanbao*, *juan* 11, 55. 51b-52a.

Building upon this visual hierarchy, the illustrations do more than merely subordinate religious figures to imperial rule; they also mobilize religious authority—particularly as embodied by Jin Bifeng—to reinforce and moralize the legitimacy of Ming governance. In other words, rather than functioning solely as a counterpoint to imperial power, religion becomes a vehicle through which the emperor's moral and political virtues are affirmed. This dynamic is especially evident in Figure 6.13, whose accompanying verse reads: "Relying on measured steps, he declares that the Great Emperor conquers without waging war; with gentle

words he offers counsel, exemplifying the Ming ruler whose virtue precedes military action" (倚仗徐行謂大帝有征無戰，善言相勸儼明王先德後行).

Significantly, this interpretive emphasis does not originate in the novel's textual narrative but is instead generated by the illustration itself. The scene seems to depict Jin Bifeng persuading the enemy through words rather than force, highlighting moral suasion as an ideal mode of diplomacy. Yet the true object of praise is not Jin Bifeng, but the "Great Emperor," whose ability to "conquer without fighting" (*you zheng wu zhan* 有征無戰) is elevated as a marker of superior moral governance. Jin Bifeng's persuasive intervention—"offering counsel with kind words" (*shan yan xiangquan* 善言相勸)—is framed simply as evidence of the Ming emperor's prior moral excellence, described in the verse as "the Ming ruler whose virtue precedes military action" (*xian de hou xing* 先德後行). Thus, Jin Bifeng functions largely as an intermediary figure through whom the illustrator articulates a broader ideological message: the ultimate moral authority resides in the Ming emperor**,** whose benevolence and virtue guide the political order.

6.3 Commercial Visuality: Repetition, Craftsmanship, Image Reuse, and Narrative Reworking in Late-Ming Print Culture

As noted above, given *Sanbao*'s close connection with the commercial printing industry of Jinling, its finely executed illustrations likely served as a marketing strategy intended to attract a wide and diverse readership. Yet despite their visual appeal, the illustrations also reveal distinct traits associated with profit-driven, rapid-production printing practices. These include a highly repetitive compositional structure, carving and textual errors, instances in which the visual narrative diverges from or simplifies the textual account, and the probable reuse of pre-existing woodblock images. As Yuming He observes, Ming commercial texts were frequently produced under conditions of haste, resulting in pervasive material

irregularities such as missing characters, mis-transcriptions, incorrect titling, discrepancies between tables of contents and their accompanying texts, and a high incidence of scribal or printing errors, often rendered in variant character forms.[282] These observations closely correspond to the printing and scribal qualities evident in the Wanli edition of *Sanbao*'s illustrations. This section therefore examines these commercial printing characteristics as they manifest in the Wanli edition of *Sanbao*'s illustrations, highlighting the tensions between aesthetic ambition and market-oriented efficiency.

To illustrate these dynamics, we may begin with a set of images whose visual content diverges noticeably from the corresponding text—discrepancies that may, though not conclusively, point to the commercial reuse of pre-existing woodblocks. In Figures 6.15 and 6.16, the illustrations closely resemble visual conventions commonly found in daily-use encyclopedias, thereby participating in the circulation of knowledge within a commercial, popular, and market-driven textual sphere. As Yuming He has demonstrated, late-Ming daily-use encyclopedias frequently place illustrative images at the head of sections labeled the "Section on Foreign Peoples." As shown in Figure 6.14, reproduced from He's research, illustrations from two different encyclopedias under this rubric invite readers to contemplate the speculative scenario of "foreign tribute presented at court."[283] Notably, these encyclopedic images share a strikingly similar compositional structure with a recurring illustration in *Sanbao*: a single foreign figure positioned before three Chinese officials, with the central figure plausibly representing the emperor or a high-ranking authority. This resemblance points to a shared visual repertoire that circulated across genres and print contexts.

[282] He, *Home and the World*, 81.
[283] Ibid., 196.

Within the Wanli edition of *Sanbao* itself, this compositional formula reappears with notable frequency. Figures 6.15 and 6.16, for example, both depict foreign figures kneeling before Ming forces with their hands bound, a visual shorthand for submission or surrender. The repeated deployment of this schema across multiple scenes underscores a highly standardized mode of image production. Such repetition accords with widespread commercial practices of repurposing standardized visual types representing Han officials and foreign figures, a strategy that not only reduced production costs but also reinforced stable and readily intelligible hierarchies of power for readers familiar with these conventions.



Figs. 3.20 and 3.21. Illustrations in *Wanshu yuanhai* 萬書淵海 (1610, Fujian) and *Wanyong zhengzong buqiuren* 萬用正宗不求人 (1609, Fujian). From *CNRS*, vol. 6, p. 185; vol. 10, p. 455.

Figure 6.14: The "Section on Foreign Peoples," daily-use encyclopedias. Reproduced from Yuming He, *Home and the World*, 196.



Figure 6.15: *Sanbao*, *juan* 14, 68. 27b-28a.



Figure 6.16: *Sanbao*, *juan* 8, 38. 26b-27a.

The same logic of visual standardization also helps to explain instances where image and text diverge more conspicuously. A comparable visual–textual mismatch appears in Figure 6.17. Whereas the text describes the foreign figure Shennaier 神奶兒 as either a woman or a hybrid divine creature combining the attributes of dragons and tigers, the

illustration instead portrays two human male generals engaged in combat. This incongruity strongly suggests that the image may have been adapted from an unrelated, pre-existing woodblock, with only the title and accompanying caption modified to correspond to the chapter episode. Taken together, such examples demonstrate how budget constraints and workshop efficiencies likely shaped the selection and modification of images within *Sanbao*'s visual repertoire.



Figure 6.17: *Sanbao*, *juan* 12, 56. 1b-2a.

In addition to these divergences, the illustrations also bear traces of hurried and inattentive production, evident in recurring inscriptional errors and occasional incomplete carving. As Figures 6.18–6.20 show, several images miscarve the name of the important character Huang Fengxian 黃鳳仙 as "Wang Fengxian" 王鳳仙 in their titles. By contrast, the narrative text identifies the character correctly as Huang Fengxian 黃鳳仙, as demonstrated in Figure 6.21. The persistence of this error across multiple blocks suggests not only a failure to verify the accuracy of the inscriptions but also the uncorrected replication of

an initial mistake—an oversight more consistent with rapid-turnaround commercial production than with careful editorial oversight.



Figure 6.18: *Sanbao*, *juan* 14, 69. 39b-40a.

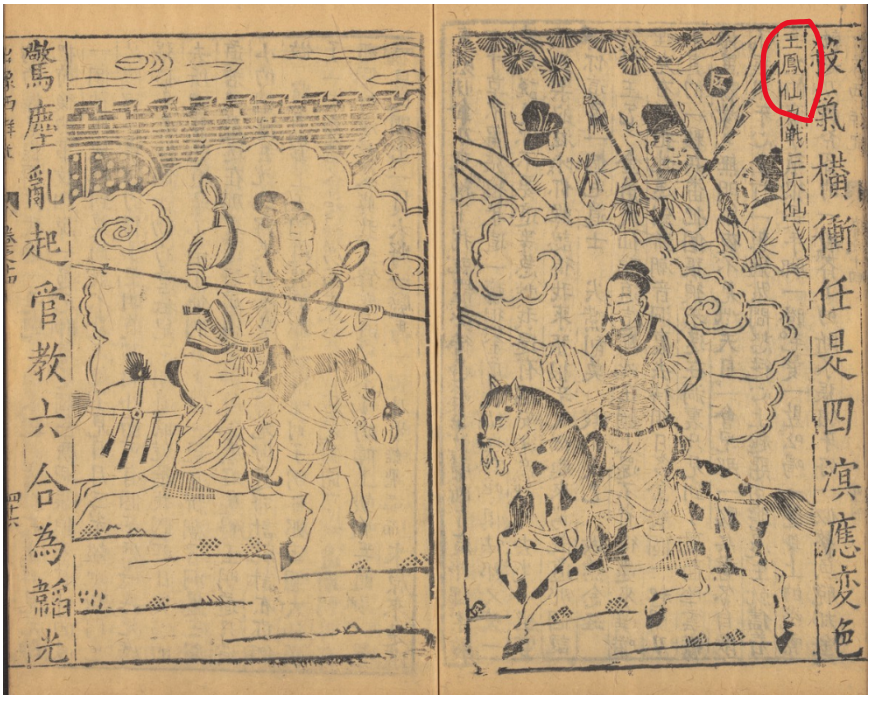


Figure 6.19: *Sanbao*, *juan* 14, 69. 45b-46a.



Figure 6.20: *Sanbao*, *juan* 14, 70. 51b-52a

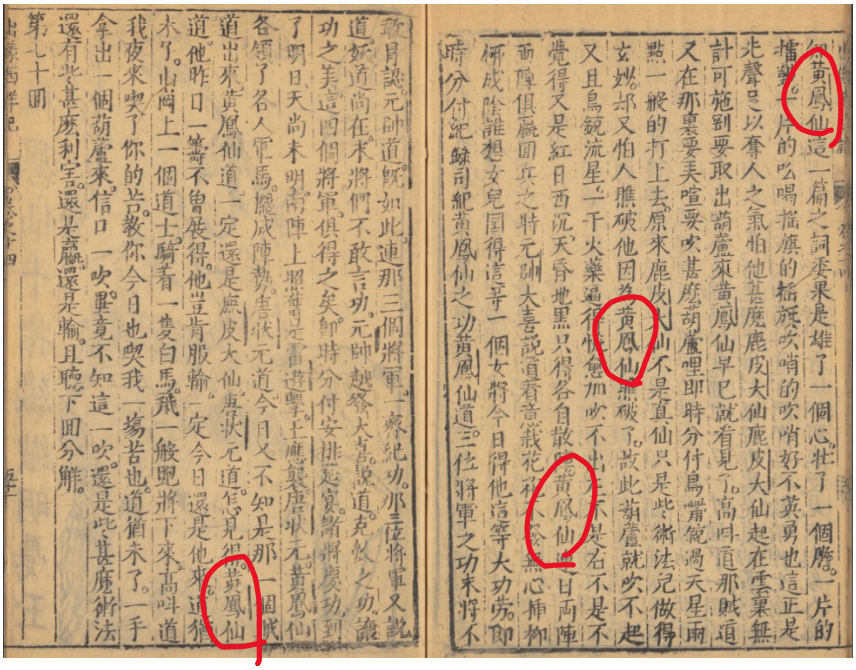


Figure 6.21: *Sanbao*, *juan* 14, 69. 50b-51a

These tendencies are further exemplified by the paired illustrations in Figure 6.22-6.23. The left-hand image, Figure 6.22, contains only the truncated inscription “The Old Mother Requests— 老母求—,” with the remaining space left blank, while the right-hand

image, Figure 6.23, bears the complete title “The Old Mother Requests the Court Preceptor to Negotiate Peace” 老母求國師講和. This unfinished carving strongly suggests that the carver halted midway—possibly upon realizing a duplication or error in the title—and chose not to recut the block. The incomplete inscription thus provides another material trace of the time pressures and economic calculations shaping the production process.



Figure 6.22-6.23 (From left to right): *Sanbao*, *juan* 9, 43. 33b; *Sanbao*, *juan* 9, 44. 40b.

Building on these observations, we may turn to a related but analytically distinct phenomenon: the illustrations’ tendency to adopt a uniformly affirmative stance toward Ming imperial authority, even in episodes where the narrative text articulates more layered or ambivalent dynamics. Whereas the preceding examples foreground the effects of commercial expediency and production constraints, this pattern reflects a different mode of visual intervention—one shaped by ideological simplification and the demands of marketable clarity. The resulting divergence between word and image generates a parallel visual narrative that often streamlines or reinterprets the text, offering readers two partially distinct

story-worlds depending on whether they engage primarily with the written or pictorial components of the book.

A particularly revealing example appears in Figure 6.24. The illustration depicts the rope spirits—the three Zong (宗) brothers—as unequivocally auspicious deities symbolizing imperial prosperity and social harmony, praised in the pictorial title as beings who "protect the realm and bless the people" (*hu guo fu min* 護國福民). The illustration thus foregrounds their benevolence, divine appointment, and contributions to the stability of the Ming order. By contrast, the corresponding textual account in Chapter 98 unfolds with far greater ambiguity. The Ming expedition first encounters a series of uncanny transformations that they interpret as signs of a demon or malign spirit obstructing their route. Only after the Celestial Master Zhang performs ritual invocations does the entity reveal itself not as a threatening demonized spirit but as a lost palm-fiber rope (*zong lan* 棕纜) that ultimately divides into three golden-armored deities—the Zong brothers—following his ritual strike with his sword.[284] Where the text narrates a process of fear, misrecognition, revelation, and reinterpretation, the illustration eliminates this complexity entirely. The visual program collapses the episode into a single, unambiguous moment of auspicious blessing, thereby reinforcing the legitimate authority and protective efficacy of the Ming dynasty. In this way, the illustration participates in the broader commercial tendency to streamline narrative tension and foreground imperial order, shaping readers' perceptions through an ideologically and aesthetically simplified visual idiom.

[284] Luo, *Sanbao*, 98: 1264-1266.

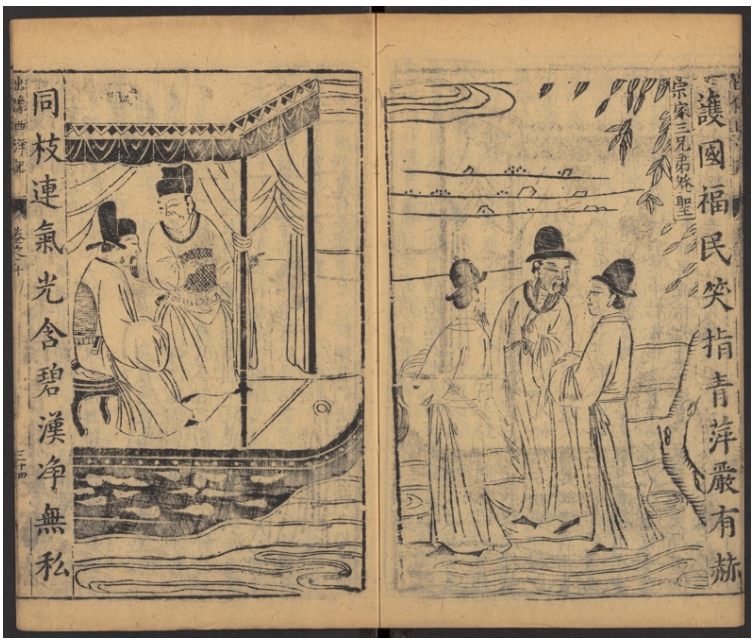


Figure 6.24: *Sanbao*, *juan* 20, 98. 33b-34a.

An even clearer instance of visual reconfiguration appears in the episode depicting the Ming army's arrival in the Kingdom of Ghosts. As discussed in the previous chapter, the textual narrative presents the encounter with King Yama as sharply satirical and confrontational: Yama's ironic admonitions ultimately compel the Ming army's withdrawal.[285] In the illustrations, however, this critical tension is substantially reworked. The narrative conflict—particularly King Yama's satirical exposure of both Ming authority and Jin Bifeng—is visually transformed into scenes of apparent harmony and mutual recognition, thereby neutralizing the text's critical edge and reasserting a stable vision of imperial order.

This transformation becomes especially apparent in what the illustrations omit. The pictorial narrative entirely suppresses the text's account of violent confrontation, in which Ming troops brutally defeat ghostly soldiers, generals, and even judicial figures, provoking King Yama's anger. Instead, both ghostly officials and King Yama are rendered in uniformly

[285] Ibid., 91:1189.

positive terms, as though no antagonism or ideological tension existed between the two parties. This visual erasure of conflict accords with the broader pattern observed above: the illustrations systematically reduce the narrative complexity in favor of clarity, decorum, and ideological reassurance.

Viewed within the commercial and religious contexts of late-Ming print culture, such a strategy is unsurprising. The illustrations appear calibrated to appeal simultaneously to readers invested in imperial legitimacy and to audiences who revered the underworld as a morally authoritative cosmological realm. By presenting both the Ming state and the ghostly kingdom in affirmative, non-confrontational terms, the visual program avoids alienating either constituency. In this sense, the illustrations operate as a calculated commercial compromise, affirming the Ming dynasty as a benevolent authority whose reach extends beyond the human realm, while simultaneously depicting the underworld as an orderly and dignified domain deserving of reverence rather than confrontation.

This visual logic is particularly evident in Figures 6.25–6.27, which present a sequence of exchanges between King Yama and the Ming envoys. In Figure 6.25, it depicts King Yama presenting a poem to Jin Bifeng. In the text, this gesture functions as a veiled rebuke, exposing Jin's violent impulses through irony and moral inversion. The pictorial inscription, however—"From afar arrives the state letter, confirming that the human world and the ghostly realm share the same governing principle; With the Buddha-sun hanging high, one comes to know that humans and ghosts alike act without partiality" (遠致國書始信幽明同此理；高懸佛日果知人鬼共無私)—elides this tension entirely. The illustration reframes admonition as affirmation, transforming critique into an expression of moral concord between the human and spirit worlds.

A similar process of visual sanitization unfolds in Figure 6.26, titled "King Yama Presents the Five Generals" (閻羅相贈五將), King Yama is shown bestowing a jade

paperweight upon the Ming army. In the textual narrative, this object carries pointed irony: initially associated with erotic fantasy and desire, it later becomes a catalyst for murderous intent. As discussed in Chapter 2, King Yama deploys the jade paperweight as a moral warning, urging the Ming army to withdraw while implicitly rebuking Jin Bifeng for harboring a "desire for killing," a formulation that deliberately analogizes sexual desire with martial violence.[286] Yet the accompanying poem—"Mighty warriors stand in serried ranks, singing the Great Wind song upon the seas; The august Lord of Yama, in half-haste, presents a rare treasure that shines within its case" (猛士森森一曲大風歌海上；閻君赫赫半亟奇貨映封中)—renders both parties in laudatory terms, reducing the moral tension to a barely perceptible undertone. For readers engaging primarily with the image, the scene registers as one of gracious hospitality and mutual admiration, obscuring the narrative's satirical critique and its implicit command for retreat.

Figure 6.27 completes this sequence by gesturing toward the Ming army's retreat through the inscription, "From court to countryside, one discerns through the missive sent by Yama; Armored troops and ritual authority extend far into the maritime kingdoms amid the alarms of war" (廊廟江湖勘破閻羅來簡牒；甲兵尊俎遠銷海國亂烽烟). Although the image acknowledges the army's withdrawal, it presents the event as a neutral and orderly resolution rather than as the consequence of humiliation or satirical defeat. Retreat is framed as a rational and dignified choice, further reinforcing the illustration's tendency to suppress conflict and moral discomfort.

Taken together, Figures 6.25–6.27 demonstrate how the visual program of *Sanbao* systematically minimizes narrative tension, moral ambiguity, and satire present in the text. By replacing conflict with harmony and critique with affirmation, the illustrations construct a

[286] Ibid., 91: 1178-1181; 1189.

simplified and ideologically affirmative visual narrative—one carefully calibrated to meet the expectations of a commercially diverse readership while reinforcing reverence for both imperial authority and the supernatural order.



Figure 6.25: *Sanbao*, *juan* 19, 91. 1b-2a.

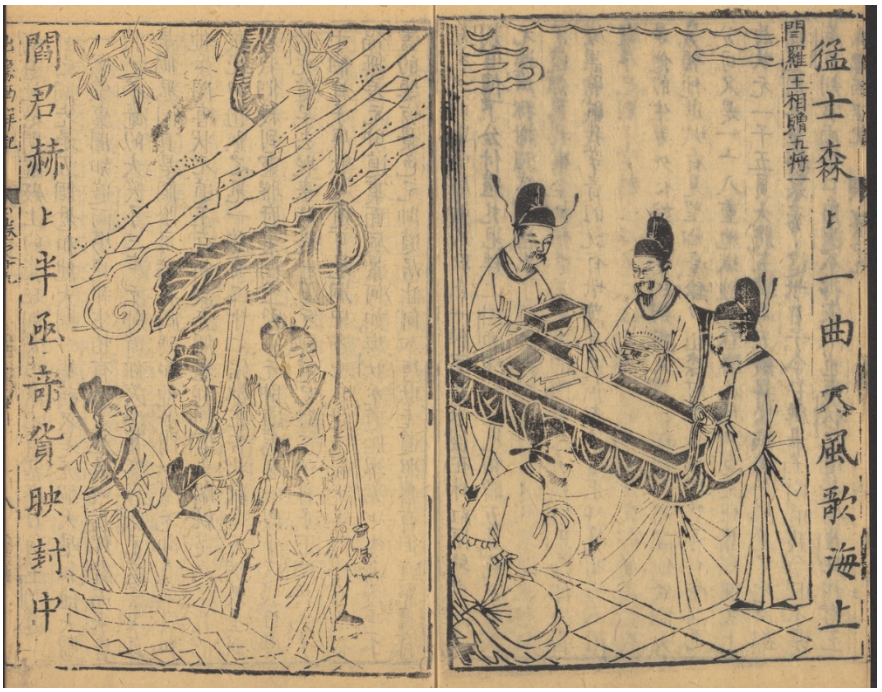


Figure 6.26: *Sanbao*, *juan* 19, 91. 7b-8a.

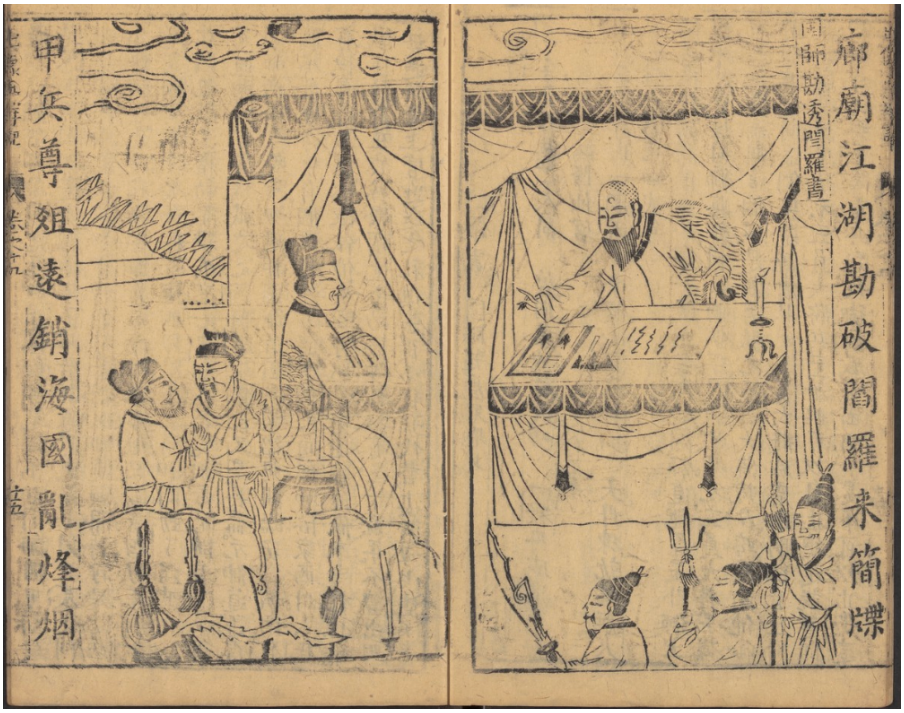


Figure 6.27: *Sanbao*, *juan* 19, 92. 14b-15a.

Overall, the illustrations of the Wanli edition demonstrate that *Sanbao*'s visual program was shaped by the intersecting pressures of commercial production, ideological legibility, and readerly expectation. Drawing upon standardized visual templates derived from daily-use encyclopedias and generic "Han-official and foreigner" imagery, the illustrations repeatedly diverge from the textual narrative through strategies of omission, simplification, and affirmative reconfiguration. Narrative ambiguity, satire, and moral tension—elements central to the novel's textual critique—are consistently flattened into scenes of harmony, benevolence, and imperial legitimacy. In this way, the illustrations do not merely accompany the text but actively re-narrate it, generating a parallel visual discourse calibrated to the imperatives of the late-Ming commercial print market. The Wanli illustrations thus exemplify how market-oriented visual practices could fundamentally reshape literary meaning, transforming *Sanbao*'s complex engagement with power, violence, and the supernatural into

a reassuring and ideologically coherent spectacle for a broad and commercially diverse readership.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the illustrations of the Wanli edition of *Sanbao* were not ancillary embellishments but central agents in shaping the work's commercial, ideological, and interpretive life. Produced within the milieu of the Jinling commercial publishing world and closely connected to presses such as the Tang family's Fuchun Hall, *Sanbao*'s visual program both participated in and departed from established local print conventions. While it drew upon familiar Jinling visual strategies—such as captioned imagery and theatrical framing—it did so in markedly intensified and adapted forms, most notably through the high density of illustrations, the consistent use of double-page spreads, and the systematic pairing of images with literati-style inscriptions.

Through close comparison with contemporaneous dramatic publications, this chapter has shown that *Sanbao*'s illustrative abundance sharply distinguishes it from other Jinling commercial prints, which typically featured fewer, single-page images distributed sparingly across chapters or acts. This unusually high ratio of image to text underscores the novel's strong commercial orientation, foregrounding visual spectacle, immediacy, and narrative accessibility as key selling points. At the same time, the incorporation of refined paired inscriptions—often composed in elevated and allusive language—functioned as a mediating strategy that reconciled mass-market visual appeal with elite literati expectations.

The chapter has further argued that *Sanbao*'s illustrations operate as an autonomous narrative system that frequently diverges from, simplifies, or reconfigures the textual account. Religious imagery consistently presents Buddhism and Daoism in mutually affirmative terms, eliding the tensions and competitions articulated in the prose narrative

in order to broaden the work's appeal across devotional communities. Similarly, repeated visual affirmations of Ming imperial authority—extending even into the realms of animals, spirits, and the underworld—construct a coherent ideological vision that privileges harmony, legitimacy, and cosmic order. In episodes involving King Yama, rope spirits, and other supernatural encounters, the illustrations systematically suppress satire, violence, and moral ambiguity, replacing them with scenes of benevolent exchange and dignified resolution. They likewise downplay the fantastic dimensions of the narrative. Figures described in the text as spirits, demons, or beings endowed with supernatural powers are frequently rendered in conventional human form. The rope spirits, for example, appear not as uncanny supernatural entities but as ordinary human figures. These visual choices reflect not only ideological preferences but also market imperatives, offering readers a reassuring and legible visual narrative aligned with dominant values.

At the material level, the chapter has shown that the Wanli illustrations bear clear traces of profit-driven production: repetitive compositional templates, carving and textual errors, incomplete inscriptions, and the reuse of generic woodblocks drawn from encyclopedic and courtly visual repertoires. Such features testify to the pressures of speed, cost, and efficiency characteristic of late-Ming commercial printing. Yet these imperfections coexist with moments of striking visual refinement, revealing a tension between aesthetic ambition and economic constraint that shaped the Wanli edition's visual economy.

Taken together, the illustrations of *Sanbao* exemplify how late-Ming commercial print culture could actively reshape literary meaning. Far from merely reflecting the text, the visual program re-narrates it—flattening complexity, redirecting interpretation, and recalibrating the work's moral and political messages to suit the expectations of a diverse

readership. By transforming narrative ambiguity and critique into visual harmony and affirmation, the Wanli illustrations illuminate the powerful role of market-oriented visual practices in mediating between literature, ideology, and commerce. In doing so, they reveal how *Sanbao*'s engagement with power, religion, and the supernatural was not only written but also profoundly *seen* through the lens of late-Ming commercial visuality.

CHAPTER VII

EPILOGUE: THE GOLDEN AND SILVER CHILDREN'S JOURNEY TO SEE CHINA

To conclude, I want to draw from an episode in Chapters 85–86 that vividly encapsulates the entanglement of Sino-foreign relations, values and tensions within both a globalizing context and a persistent Sinocentric framework. In this episode, amid a financial crisis within the Ming navy, Eunuch Sanbao devises a plan to borrow funds from the soldiers, promising double repayment upon their return. To supplement this insufficient sum, Huang Fengxian, the former general from the Kingdom of Women, employs magical means to procure substantial wealth for the fleet. In addition to a shipload of silver, she returns holding two children—one in each hand: the child on her left dressed in yellow, and the one on her right in white (一手一個娃娃，左邊娃娃穿一身黃，右邊娃娃穿一身白). [287] These figures are later identified as a "golden child" (*jin wawa* 金娃娃) and a "silver child" (*yin wawa* 銀娃娃), both over seven feet tall and seemingly composed entirely of gold and silver.

Huang Fengxian's position in this episode is highly suggestive. As a defector to the Ming cause, she occupies a liminal and mediating role that is at once gendered and geopolitical. While she assists the Ming navy through her extraordinary abilities, her act of "bringing" (*dai* 帶) both silver and the golden children, symbolically parallel the historical influx of foreign wealth into Ming China. Her ambiguous affiliation with both foreign and Chinese spheres—reminiscent of intermediary agents who operate between

[287] Ibid., 85: 1096.

distinct cultural and economic systems—reflects the fluid and often ambivalent relationships embedded within late-Ming global trade networks.

Although the narrative does not explicitly assign her the role of a commercial intermediary, this episode invites an interpretive reading in which Huang Fengxian evokes figures of foreign agents or brokers active in maritime exchange. In this sense, her retrieval of treasure—and notably the golden and silver children—resonates metaphorically with the transregional circulation of silver, commodities, and even human actors between China and overseas regions. These figures may thus be understood as symbolic embodiments of emergent forms of capital and shifting regimes of monetary value within an increasingly globalized economy.

The origins of the Golden and Silver children remain unspecified; they are introduced only as figures brought to the Ming forces through a magical portal by Huang. Their expressed desire to "go to China to see the world" (要到中國去看世界), however, strongly suggests a non-Chinese origin.[288] Rather than functioning as expressions of admiration for Chinese civilization, their motivation reflects an open-ended curiosity—a desire to encounter the unfamiliar that resonates with the shifting socio-historical conditions of the late-Ming. As global trade expanded and cross-cultural encounters intensified, China became increasingly embedded within transregional networks of exchange and consumption. In this context, the act of "seeing China" signifies not cultural reverence but exploratory desire, echoing the perspective of foreign travelers and missionaries who approached China as an object of discovery rather than as a civilizational center to be emulated.

[288] Ibid., 85: 1096. Although the term *shijie* (世界) is closely associated with Buddhist thought, in Buddhism it does not simply refer to the physical earth or the globe. Rather, it denotes a realm of existence defined by both temporal and spatial dimensions in which sentient beings live, undergo rebirth, and pursue spiritual cultivation. In the context of Sanbao, however, shijie does not appear to invoke this specifically Buddhist meaning. Instead, it refers to the wider human world that the two children wish to explore by traveling to China. I therefore translate *shijie* simply as "world."

Following this episode, an exchange between Huang Fengxian and the Ming commanders further reveals both the condition of the golden and silver children and the differing attitudes toward their value. When Huang asks whether the silver she has provided is sufficient, she proposes that, "if it proves inadequate, these two children could be sold, for they are worth a few taels of silver" (若不夠之時，把這兩個娃娃去賣，也值好幾兩銀子). Minister Wang, however, rejects this suggestion, emphasizing instead the children's expressed desire to "go to China to see the world" and questioning the appropriateness and limited monetary value of such a transaction (這娃娃說要到我們中國去看世界，怎麼好賣他？況兼賣他，能值幾何).[289]

Despite their imposing seven-foot stature, the two children are portrayed as strikingly innocent and unresisting. They remain silent throughout the exchange and exhibit neither fear nor hesitation in an unfamiliar environment, demonstrating their confidence. When Huang offers them wine—despite having just suggested that they could be sold—they immediately accept and follow her instructions, drinking without hesitation and entering the commander's cabin "freely and unrestrained" (*zi you zi zai* 自由自在).[290] Their silence and compliance suggest both a lack of linguistic or cultural comprehension and a form of naïve openness that renders them unaware of the possible danger and the competing valuations imposed upon them.

The tension and symbolic relationships among the two children, Huang Fengxian, and the Ming commanders may be analyzed through three interrelated dimensions. First, the juxtaposition of divergent attitudes toward the children's material value, their childlike innocence and apparent agency, and their political–cultural significance—as figures embodying a desire to "see China"—reveals multiple regimes of value and

[289] Ibid., 85: 1096.
[290] Ibid., 85: 1096.

perception that are central to the narrative. From the perspective of the children themselves, their mobility and apparent agency mirror the circulation of commodities and precious metals, such as silver and gold, across maritime trade networks. At the same time, their silence introduces a crucial tension: although they appear to act freely, their lack of voice suggests structural limitations, including linguistic and cultural incomprehension, that complicate this apparent autonomy.

The episode also stages a conflict between competing systems of value within the late-Ming context, articulated through both gendered and ethnicized symbolism. Huang Fengxian approaches the children from an economic perspective, explicitly reducing them to commodities that may be exchanged for silver. By contrast, Eunuch Sanbao and Minister Wang reinterpret the children's significance in political and hierarchical terms, framing them as potential tribute whose presentation to the court would constitute a meritorious act (回朝之日，把去進貢朝廷，也是他一功).[291]

As a foreign woman from the Kingdom of Women, Huang Fengxian occupies a position marked by both gendered and cultural otherness, and is associated with an emergent logic that privileges monetary value and material gain. In contrast, the Ming commanders function as representatives of a traditional tribute system that structures Sino-foreign relations through hierarchical and moralized frameworks. This tension is further illustrated in chapter 86, when Huang, in her attempt to acquire additional wealth, inadvertently enters the treasury of the Kingdom of Aden (*Aden guo* 阿丹國). In order to escape, she fabricates a claim that in the past she was the "mother of gold" (*jin mu* 金母)and will be the future "mother of silver" (*yin mu* 銀母) asserting that all gold and silver in the world originate from her body (大凡世界上的銀子，都是我肚裡出來

[291] Ibid., 85: 1097.

的).[292] This rhetoric metaphorically invokes a logic in which wealth generates wealth, echoing the principles of commercial expansion and capital accumulation, while recasting economic production in terms of a maternal lineage.

In contrast to this formulation, the traditional tribute system frequently conceptualizes Sino-foreign relations through the hierarchical model of a father–son relationship. Huang's articulation thus introduces an alternative symbolic order, one that competes with patriarchal hierarchy by advancing a feminized and generative model of economic value. As a foreign female figure, she not only embodies emerging monetary logic but also reconfigures the symbolic framework through which value and authority are imagined, thereby exposing tensions between established political hierarchies and the expanding influence of a monetized, globally connected economy.

Furthermore, although Huang Fengxian claims that both gold and silver originate from her body, she nevertheless proposes selling the Golden and Silver children if necessary. This contradiction signals a shift in value and perception, in which relationships are increasingly evaluated in terms of profit and exchange rather than according to Confucian ideals of maternal care and moral obligation. Her suggestion implies that, under the growing influence of monetary logic, even fundamental human relationships may be redefined and reorganized.

A similar reconfiguration of relational values appears in chapter 85. When Huang boldly claims that she will secure a vast sum of silver, her husband, General Tang, expresses fear and refuses to share in her risk, stating, "If you choose to seek your own death, how can you expect me to die alongside you?" (你便自送其死，終不然教我和你同死麼). Huang responds by invoking the Confucian ideal of conjugal unity—"In life,

[292] Ibid., 86: 1104.

husband and wife share the same bed; in death, they share the same grave" (生則同衾，死則共穴)—thereby affirming a normative expectation of mutual loyalty and inseparability.[293] This assertion stands in striking contrast to Huang's earlier willingness to sell the Golden and Silver Children for profit should additional funds be required. The juxtaposition reveals the complexity of Huang's position as an intermediary figure operating between competing systems of value. On the one hand, she readily subjects her adopted "children" to a logic of exchange, treating them as commodities whose worth can be measured in silver. On the other hand, she invokes the Confucian ideal of conjugal fidelity in order to affirm an enduring moral bond with Tang. Rather than simply exposing inconsistency, this contrast illustrates the coexistence of different regimes of value within the novel, in which economic calculation and traditional ethical obligations remain simultaneously operative.

Yet Tang counters with a more pragmatic and disillusioned adage: "Husband and wife are like birds in the same forest—when disaster strikes, each flies its own way" (夫妻本是同林鳥，大限來時各自飛).[294] This exchange reveals a tension between moral ideals and self-preserving calculation based on the concept of personal benefits. In the previous chapter, the Ming army further demonstrates this shift by borrowing money from soldiers with promises of repayment in the form of interest or official positions, thereby extending monetary logic into structures of authority and loyalty. [295]

Finally, the most striking paradox lies in the reciprocal positioning of the two children and Ming China as simultaneously subjects and objects of vision. The Golden and Silver Children perceive themselves as active agents who journey to China in order to

[293] Ibid., 85: 1092.
[294] Ibid., 85: 1093.
[295] Ibid., 84: 1089-1090.

“see the world.” The Ming court, represented by the eunuch commander, attempt to reframe them within an imperial regime of vision in which they become subjects of observation, display, and reward. Their desire to look is thus transformed into an occasion to be looked at. The relationship between these two positions is thus inherently unstable: both sides function as observers and observed, each presuming its own agency in defining and interpreting the other.

Through this tension, the narrative exposes a broader late-Ming condition in which economic and political systems of value coexist and intersect. It also foregrounds the ambivalent status of foreign bodies and circulating wealth within this shifting framework. As embodiments of both material value and sentient innocence, the Golden and Silver children crystallize the paradox of a world increasingly shaped by global circulation. In such a world, value, mobility, and human presence are simultaneously commodified, symbolized, and contested.

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