

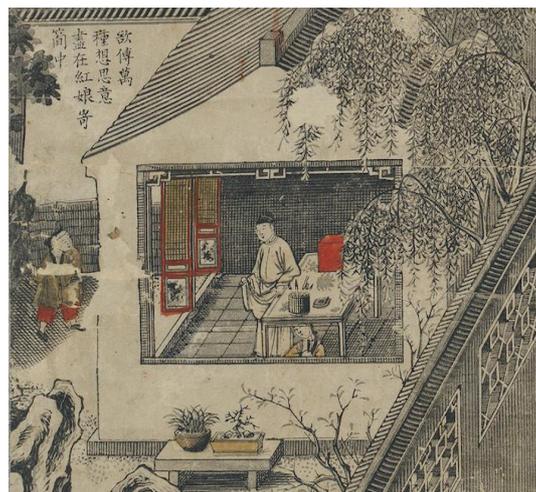
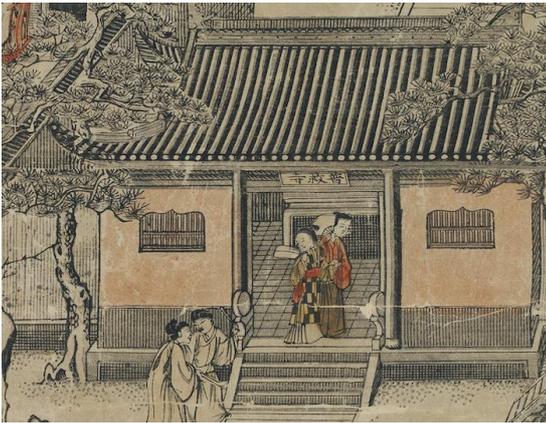


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**Warming up:**

For this week, we will investigate a piece that tells an interesting story and was made by with an intriguing construction technique. Our *Romance of the Western Chamber* is actually a woodblock print that was subsequently hand-colored and mounted as a hanging scroll. The work tells the tale of a romance between a noblewoman and a young scholar, as staged in a Buddhist temple. Our hanging scroll shows nine scenes from the written work. To warm up, take a close look at the details of the scroll below. Based on your observations, what do you think is happening in each scene?



### Problem Set:

- Where are spectators situated in viewing the scenes?
- How does the artist frame scenes within the structure to tell the story?
- How is space organized? What is in the foreground and what is in the background?
- Do any of the details remind you of our previous paintings?
- Why include the whole drama in a single print?

### The Story of the Western Chamber—a Love Begins

A natural starting point to begin our exploration this week is from the story itself. What is *The Story of the Western Chamber*? How does our hanging scroll orchestrate the tale according to a grand visual plan?

*The Story of the Western Chamber* is one of the most famous Chinese dramatic works adapted by the Yuan dynasty playwright Wang Shifu (王實甫). Set during the Tang dynasty, it details a secret love affair between Zhang Sheng (張生), a young scholar whose name literally means “the student Zhang” and Cui Yingying (崔鶯鶯), the daughter of a chief minister of the Tang court. Adding to the intrigue, the two consummate their love without parental approval.

The couple first meets in a Buddhist monastery called Pujiu Temple. Yingying and her mother were lodging at the temple to take a rest and to pray for Yingying’s deceased father as they escorted the coffin of his father to their hometown. As ladies of the noble ranking, it was common for them to stay at temples for added privacy and serenity. Moreover, in Yingying’s case, she was also seeking shelter at the temple to hide local bandits with an eye for her beauty.

On the other hand, Zhang Sheng was a scholar from a modest family who aspired to become an officer in the government. He was making a stop on his way to the capital to take the civil service examination. Once he passed the exam, Zhang Sheng could acquire a position in either a local bureau or the central court—gradually rising in status. This was a common goal for every scholar in the feudal China (even today the college entrance exam isn’t too far off!). But at the moment, Zhang Sheng was taking a pit stop on the way to visit a childhood friend, General Du Que (杜确), who was stationed not far away. As General Du had mentioned the renowned scenery at Pujiu Temple, Zhang went to pay a visit.

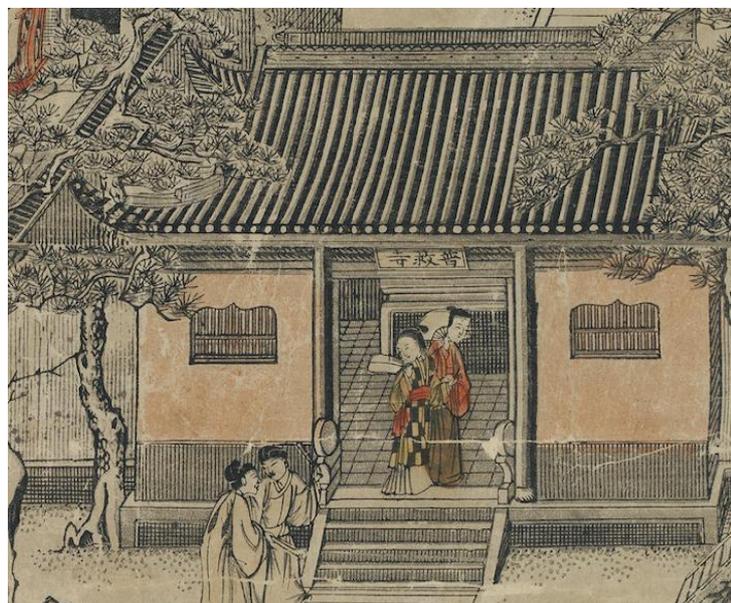


Fig. 1: Love at first sight...

As it happened, Zhang Sheng was blessed with more than great scenery during his stay. It was love at first sight when he encountered Yingying for the first time within the temple grounds accompanied by her servant (Fig. 1).

However, Zhang Sheng was prevented from expressing his feelings as Yingying was under her mother's watchful eye. At best, Zhang Sheng was able to read poems as he lingered on the outer wall of her chamber. Despondent, he let his feelings flow ceaselessly and was eventually reciprocated by Yingying on the other side of the wall.



Fig. 2: The bandits arrive

### Obstacles, Affections

Sun the Flying Tiger, a local bandit whom Yingying was avoiding, soon dispatched bandits to surround the monastery in an effort to abduct her. Yingying was in a vulnerable position, as her father just passed away and there were only several ladies accompanying her on the journey. Distraught, Yingying's mother agreed that whoever drove the bandits away could have Yingying's hand in marriage. Seeing his opportunity, Zhang Sheng contacted his friend, General Du, whom successfully subdued the bandits.

Just as it seemed that Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying were set to be married, Yingying's mother began to regret her rash promise to Zhang Sheng—the Cui had a tradition of not accepting commoners into the family. She asserted that Yingying as already betrothed to the son of another high official.

The two young lovers were greatly disappointed and pined away in their unrequited love. Fortunately, Yingying's maid, Hong Niang (紅娘), initially was sent by Yingying's mother to spy on her daughter, took pity on the couple and served as a messenger to arrange secret unions between the two. Nowadays, the term "Hong Niang" refers to wingmen who help facilitate the pursuit of romantic relationships.



Fig. 3:  
A plan to defeat the ruffians

Fig. 5:  
A young lover pines after  
a broken promise



Hong Niang's assistance to the couple became an enduring motif used in many other paintings, porcelains, and theatre performances as seen in the illustration below. Zhang Sheng is usually depicted as an eager young man climbing the wall to sneak a glance of Yingying. In our Harvard piece, Zhang Sheng is depicted a bit more cool at the moment of encounter and servants deliver a message between the couple. The reason for this artistic choice remains unclear, but *The Story of the Western Chamber* was originally regarded as indecent given that it depicted love outside the boundary of explicit marriage. Moralists of the period feared that readers were in danger of becoming struck with illicit notions under its rebellious influence.

Fig. 5  
Album of scenes from *The Story of the Western Wing*  
Qiu Ying 仇英 (ca. 1494-1552)  
Ink and color on silk, Freer Gallery of Art



## Happily Ever After

When Yingying's mother discovered what her daughter had done, she reluctantly consented to a formal marriage on one condition—Zhang must travel to the capital and pass the civil service examination. To the joy of the young lovers, Zhang Sheng proves to be a brilliant scholar and was quickly appointed to high office. The story ends on a happy note as the two were finally married.

The original story on which the drama was based, *The Biography of Yingying* (*Yingying Zhuan* 《鶯鶯傳》), was written by Yuan Zhen (元稹) during the Tang Dynasty. In the tale, Zhang Sheng ultimately broke away from Yingying and did not ask for her hand in marriage. Instead, he decided that the relationship was mutually incompatible after passing his exams and chose to marry a lady in the capital. Yingying followed the arrangement of her mother and had reasonably good marriage. When Zhang Sheng's duties took him near to Yingying's new home, he attempted to visit but was rejected. She instead delivered a poem stating how miserable her life was, but Zhang Sheng responded with a poem stating that the past was beyond recollection.



Fig. 6:  
斋堂闹会  
Memorial Ritual

## II. The Text in the Print

Having sketched the story in brief, let us take a look at how the Harvard print tells the story with text and image. The work is structured as a combination of eight scenes, each with a colophon on a wall or blank space beside it. The eight pieces of text summarize the plot of the corresponding scene. In the print, the artist articulates the plot through pictorial conventions and written text—both are important to understanding the story as told on the piece. Let us take a closer look at the combined passages of text and image.



The date of the exams still far off, [Zhang Sheng] took up the reins [of his horse] and set off. He wished to avail himself of monks' quarters for his lodging, reviewing the Classics from dawn til dusk.

試期尚遠以羈程，欲借僧房一寓，  
早晚溫習經文。



Hastening home for the funeral they [sought shelter] at Pujiu, [Yingying and her mother] confessed their sins and sought penitence. Zhang Sheng caught a glance, [she was like a] flower growing luxuriant at the sign of rain.

奔喪普救，禮懺追修，張生顧盼，  
雨意綢繆。



A stratagem that can defeat the rebels, the delivery of the letter depends on Huiming.

驅退賊兵策，傳書杖慧明。



A rebel army of five thousand was swept away in an instant like a rolling cloud. Zhang Junrui (Zhang Sheng) is fated for admiration and respect.

半萬賊兵，卷浮雲片時掃淨。  
張君瑞合當欽敬。



Wishing to pass a myriad of feelings between yearning lovers, All placed within the slips sent with Hong Niang.

欲傳萬種相思意，盡在紅娘寄簡中。



My spring departed in the mouth of the swallow, I fear that people follow the blossoms in growing old, And no one shall take sympathy upon me.

被燕銜春去，芳心自戀。怕人隨花老，無人見憐。

	<p>The charms of spring vex men and I cannot get to sleep, The moon is bright beneath the flowers, An incense burner full of fragrance. 春色惱人, 眠不得, 月明花下, 一爐香。</p>
	<p>The peaches rosy and willows green, through the nine creeks and eighteen caverns. Hong Niang and the boy-servant, battled like Chu and Han.  桃紅柳綠, 九溪十八洞。紅娘與琴童: 楚漢爭鋒。</p>

On the top right corner of the print, the text reads:

A gifted scholar and beautiful lady originally of one heart.  
Meeting by chance, our feelings are strong and deep.  
After all this is a marvelous and destined affair.  
The brush tip was completely slanted, spreading forth its spirit,  
In imitation of the brush force from the West.

佳人才子本同心  
偶爾相逢膠漆深  
總之一段奇緣事  
筆底全憑傳出神  
仿泰西筆意。

On the top left the text in the clouds reads:

Complete edition of *The Story of the Western Chamber*  
Newly engraved in the summer of the year of Dingmao.(1747)

全本西廂記, 丁卯初夏新鑄。

Having seen the manner in which the story was inscribed onto our print in prose and verse, let us reconsider the following questions before moving on:

- Does the architecture in our print strike you as a temple or a residence? Secular or sacred?
- What are some of the characteristics of the architectural layout?
- How does the layout correspond to the plot of the story?

### III. Architecture as Stage—Perspectives

Renaissance theorists described perspective as an "open window," implying that systems of perspective make the surface of an image transparent. Linear perspective thus allowed the artist to create a window into a believable space. The foundations for the theories of perspective can be traced back to Euclid's *Optics* (ca. 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) and were linked to mathematics. Linear perspective is said to have been invented by the Italian Renaissance architect Filippo Brunelleschi in 1420. At its essence, linear perspective is a geometrical method for projecting three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional plane and is created through a vanishing point towards which all parallel lines (orthogonals) converge. The system is based on a viewer from a fixed vantage point. From that particular point, perspective creates the illusion of measured and receding space.

Brunelleschi's discovery was noted in Leon Battista Alberti's *De Pittura* (1436), an influential Renaissance treatise on painting and the first to set out the laws of linear perspective in writing. In fact, single-point perspective was applied to architecture and painting from the Renaissance onwards. An early 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch engraving found below demonstrates the single-point linear perspective in practice.

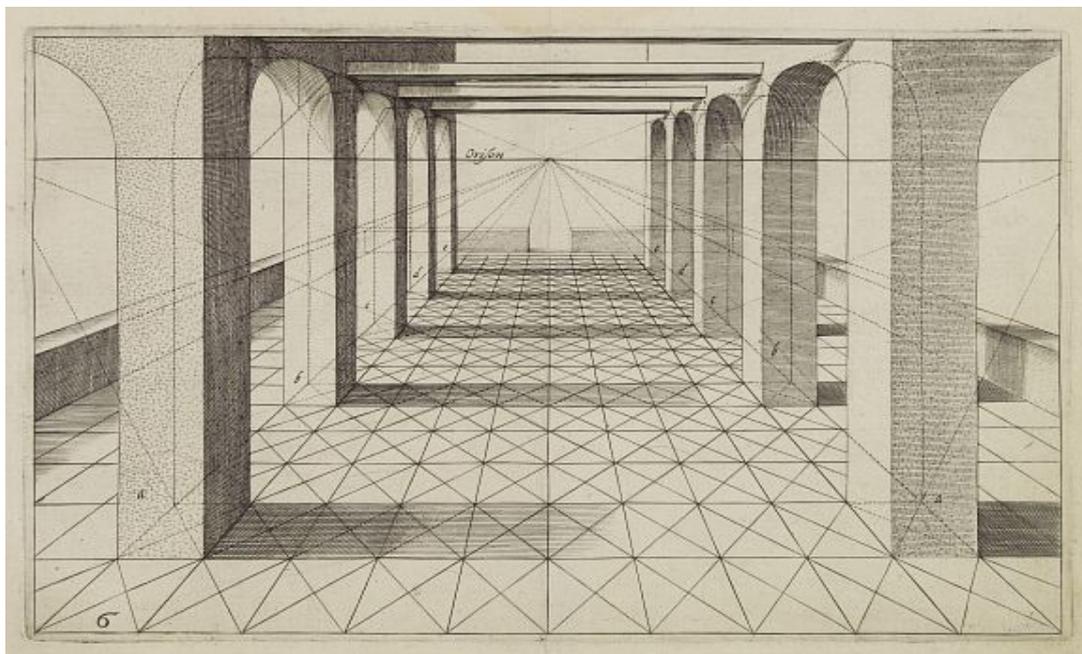


Fig. 7: *Book of Perspective*, Hans Vredeman de Vries, published by Lvgdvni Batavorvm 1604-5, engraving, 18.0 x 28.5 cm, Yale University Library

In addition to linear perspective, views of Renaissance gardens and cities were increasingly drawn from an aerial axonometric perspective—a type of a parallel projection in which the vanishing point is rotated. These types of axonometric surveys were inspired by conventions of cartography and topography. In maps, a bird’s eye view was preferred over Brunelleschi’s one-point perspectives. A prime example of this is the following engraving by the French architect Etienne Dupérac, showing a high bird’s eye perspective of the gardens and architecture of Villa d’Este in Tivoli, just outside of Rome.

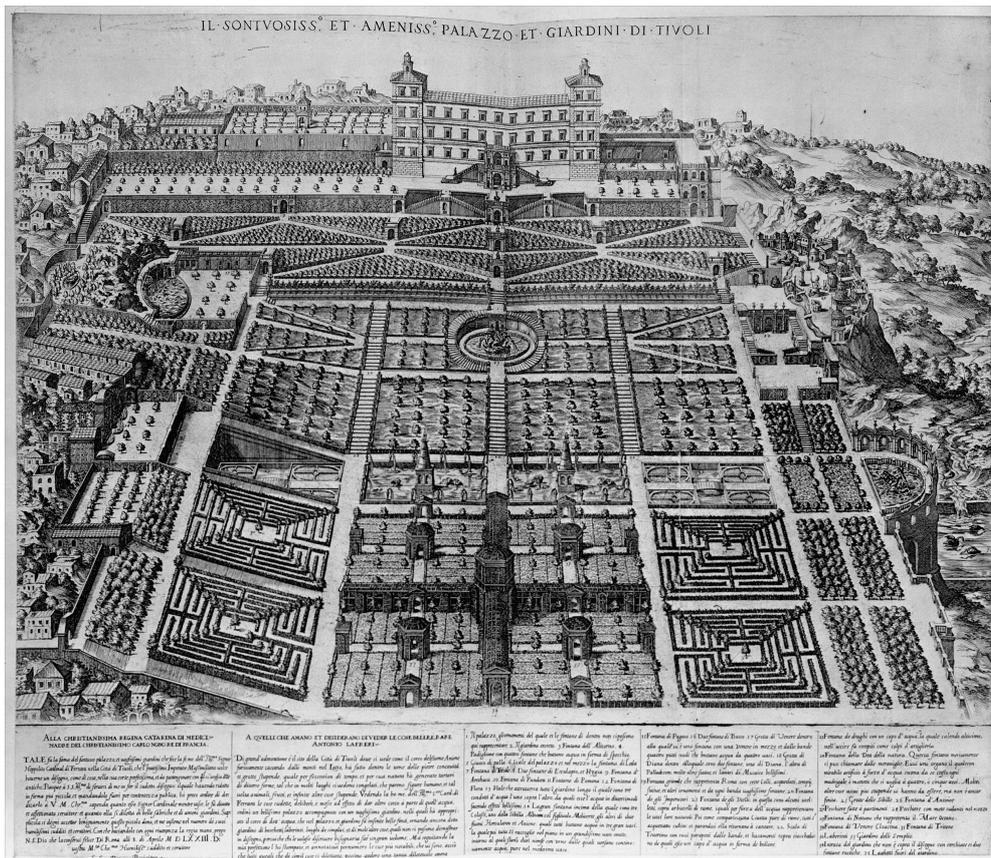


Fig. 8: *Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae: Tivoli Palace and Gardens*  
 Etienne DuPérac (1535–1604), published by Antonio Lafreri (ca. 1512–1577), 1573  
 Etching, 49.0 x 57.2 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Such aerial perspective emphasized the artist’s ability to order nature while also highlighting overall layout. From the Renaissance onwards, the application of perspective was understood as a tool for ordering social and political spheres. Panoramas, bird’s eye views of cities, and plans of ancient archaeological sites were used as political propaganda. Artistic order was linked to social order. Dupérac’s propagandistic garden print was actually first created as a drawing to be given to the Holy Roman Emperor, indicating that aerial perspective was a privileged and sovereign mode of communication. Such bird’s eye perspectives were referred to as a “god’s eye views” in sixteenth-century German maps. Consider now the perspective of our object. Would it qualify as linear or aerial perspective?

### Western Perspective in China

Western perspective came to China in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century through Jesuit artists and Renaissance and Baroque treatises on linear perspectives collected in the Jesuit Library in

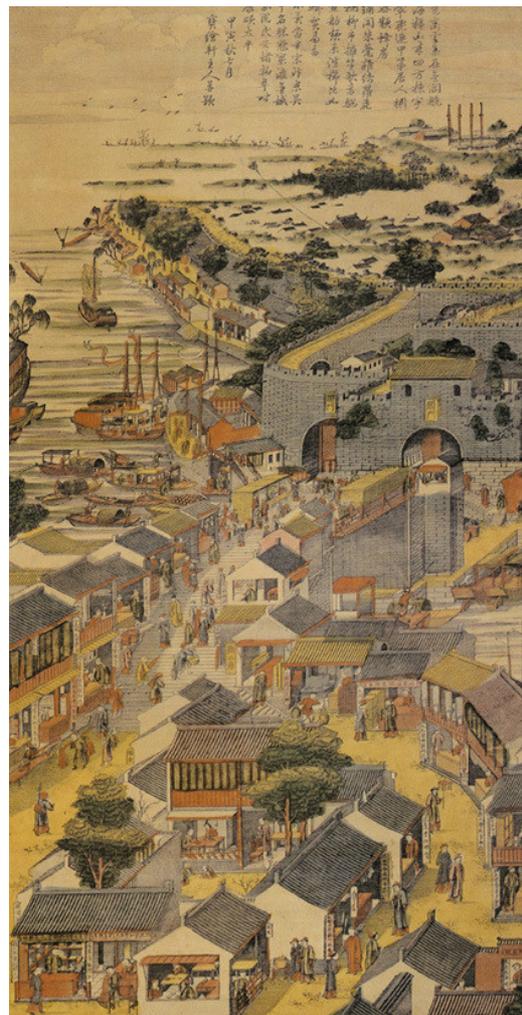
Beijing. The Kangxi Emperor's fascination with the linear perspective even caused a school of perspective to emerge at the imperial court. The 18<sup>th</sup> century Chinese term for linear perspective was *xianfa*, translated as the “line method.” This term was coined by the Chinese expert of Western science, Nian Xiyao (1671-1738), in his preface to the second edition of *Shixue* (Science of Vision). The *Shixue* was inspired by Andrea Pozzo’s *Perspetiva Pictorum et Architectorum* (ca. 1693), an influential Renaissance manual that sought to teach artists how to draw in linear perspective. However, Nian’s manual was more than a Chinese translation of Pozzo’s treatise. The *Shixue* integrated Western illusionistic painting techniques with established Chinese artistic concepts. Nian’s treatise identified the vanishing point as common to both China and the West.

The Jesuit court artist Giuseppe Castiglione, who served the Qing court for fifty years, has been often credited with popularizing linear perspective in China during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1756, the Qianlong emperor even asked Castiglione to design a section in the Yuanmingyuan imperial retreat that blended the traditional concepts of Chinese gardens with Western linear perspective.

Preceding Nian and Castiglione, a type of woodblock known as the “Suzhou block print” had become increasingly widespread. These types of prints combined Chinese subjects with European perspectival techniques. The scholar-official class disdained realistic perspectival representations, and this may be why these Suzhou prints are now mainly found in Japanese collections—indicating that they were either made for export or better appreciated in Japan.

Fig. 9: *Encyclopedic View of Jobs in the City*  
(*Sanbai liushi hangtu* 三百六十行圖)  
A bird’s eye view of Suzhou, dated 734  
Umi-Mori Art Museum in Hiroshima

The rise of linear perspective in Chinese art can be further linked to a widespread fascination with Western paintings, decorative arts, and material culture at the court. Additionally, linear perspective was connected to the development of specialized scientific knowledge that could in turn bolster the political might of the court.



## Perspective and Power

Systems of perspective allow our surroundings to be ordered and arranged. They force the world into a geometrical outline and individual compartments. Aerial perspective in particular is linked to the idea of the *panopticon*—a term that combines the latin word *pan* (all) with *optic* (seeing). The term panopticon refers to a building first proposed by the 18<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham as a type of an institutional building in which individual rooms or cells were watched by an all-seeing tower. However, these compartments would not know whether they were being surveyed and thus the inhabitants within would be constantly mindful of their behaviors.

Later, the French philosopher Michel Foucault famously wrote on this concept and related it to the architecture of theatres. Foucault stated the following in *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*:

In [theaters] each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions - to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide - it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.

In this section, we have considered the origins of Western perspective, its applications in China, and underlying systems of power and control behind perspectival representations. The idea of the panopticon also addresses how the environment of architecture governs the behaviors of the people inside.

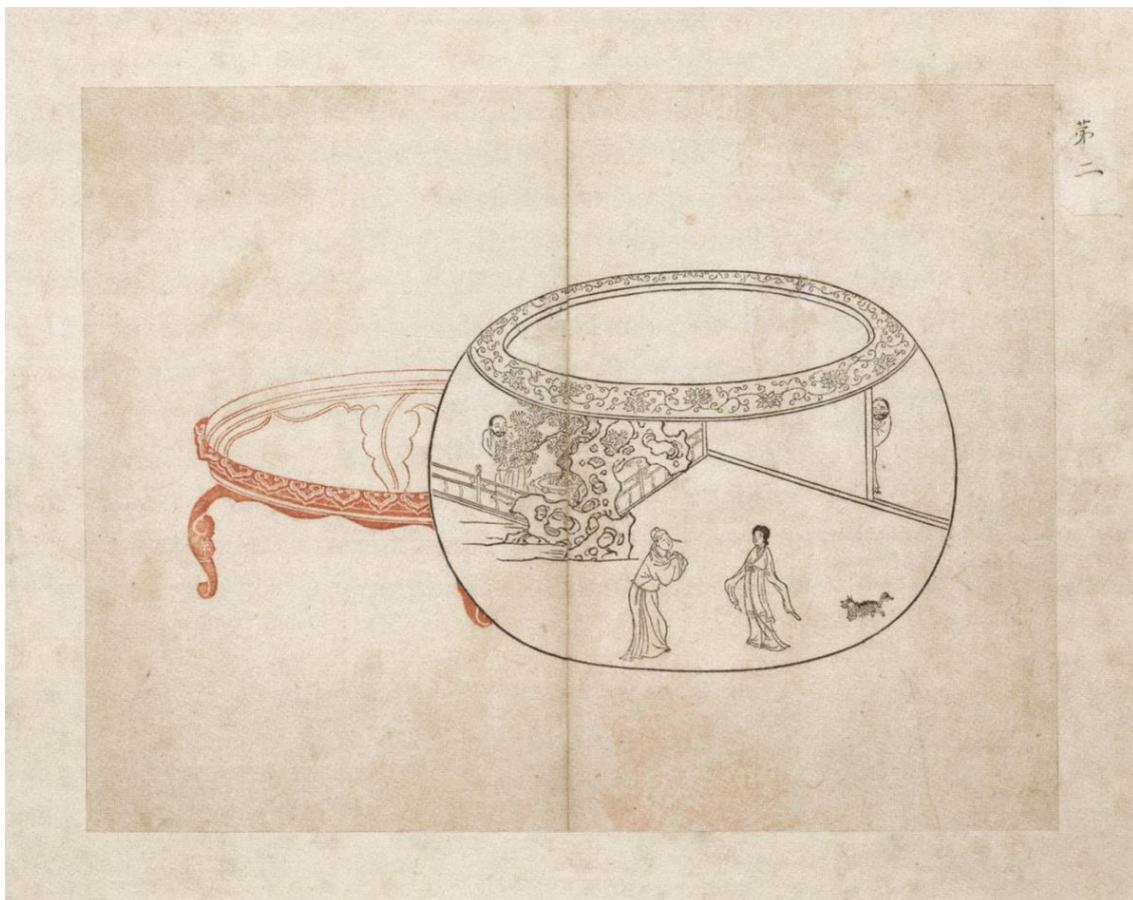
Consider how architecture can influence human behavior. In our print, does architecture influence this visualization of the story? How would it be different if we saw the narrative unfolding in a series of compartments after one another instead of seeing them all at once? How does understanding perspective enhance your reading of the story?

### III. Variation and Segmentation: A Comparison with the Min Qiji Set

Garden designers in China had to cope with formidable constraints on land use. One technique common to both rural and urban garden sites was that of variation and segmentation, designed to vary the impressions that the garden wanderer received. The Chinese garden technique can be compared to the experience of small Renaissance cities, like Siena and Pienza. Alberti believed that the nature of reality is change, always moving “*di varietà in nuove varietà*” (variety in new varieties). His belief in change and variety as part of natural law caused Alberti to recommend winding streets in his *De Re Aedificatoria* (On the Art of Building). The winding paths in a Chinese garden, like the streets advocated by Alberti, lead the spectator to discover a new structure at every step. Doing so makes the actual experience of the urban fabric and garden optical rather than mathematical, dynamic rather than static, causing it to unfold in a temporal sequence that is determined by the spectator's physical movement.

The strategy of spatial articulation employed in this example also evokes a compositional technique that is specific to Chinese gardens: the construction of narrative through episodes. Before this print, the Chinese experienced a narrative painting by unrolling a scroll from right to left, one small segment at a time. With the introduction of the Western perspective, what you can see and what you should see became altered. Viewers had the freedom to turn their eyes towards any component or episode of the narrative. Our print witnessed the transformation of what constituted an ideal viewing experience. The logic of this mode of print design is better grasped by a moving spectator, rather than from an ideal view or vantage point. One is not only a beholder but also a wanderer in the garden.

As a manifestation of the artistic shift, a comparison of the Harvard piece with the Min Qiji print set highlights the drastic difference between how the 17th and 18th century Chinese illustrated the play. From the 17th century, artists began to grow dissatisfied with merely mimicking a dramatic narrative. Instead, they tried to supply well-known play texts with creative illustrations. The Min Qiji set from the 17th century consists of 20 woodcut prints, each illustrating one of the 20 acts of the play. What is unique about this set is that it not only illustrates a play, but also represents a variety of popular art forms. The image below shows the two lovers' first encounter on a vessel. The perspective here changes according to the rounded shape of the vessel. As a viewer, we are almost anticipating what is happening on the other side of the vessel. Thus, the artist is depicting a contemporary phenomenon: how scenes from famous dramas were increasingly used to decorate ceramic wares and other types of utensils. But, in our 18<sup>th</sup> century print from Suzhou, thanks to the importation of the Western perspective, a whole drama instead of just one act can be plotted smoothly in a single print.



The garden setting has always been very significant in Chinese drama. Another half of our print was discovered in a Japanese collection that completes the play (on the left below).



Why then was it preferred to include the whole drama in a single print in the 18<sup>th</sup> century? One tentative answer to this question is that the Qing government censored the Tale of the Western Chamber in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Qianlong Emperor in 1753 forbade the book to be translated into the Manchu language, indicating the governmental attitude towards this book. However, the story in this book became so popular that the illustrations began to stand by themselves, as a book without any text. Another point of interest related to the print is that it shows highlights from the drama, rather than the full drama, as the audience would have been already very familiar with the play. In this case, our current print, although it calls itself “a print representing the full drama,” is in fact a combination of important highlights.

#### IV. The Tradition of *Huan* (illusion)

We will now take a look at two particular motifs delineated in the print: clouds and rockery. They are both important images for the tradition of *huan* (illusion) in Chinese art. Yet, why do we find them in our Harvard print?

##### The Clouds



According to the scholar, Wu Hung, in ancient Chinese writings, images with deceptive power were referred to as *huan*, which has three different but interrelated meanings: “illusion/illusory,” “illusionism/illusionistic,” and “magical transformation/conjuration.” When used in the sense, the term denotes accuracy of depiction: the spectator feels they are seeing an actual object or space but knows that what they look at is a picture. The underlying notion is therefore the dualism of an illusory pictorial image mirroring reality and thus opposes reality. Illusionism, however, confuses distinctions. By employing certain media or techniques, the artist is able to deceive not only the viewer’s eye but also his mind and persuade them to take what is painted for real.

Likewise, Kristina Kleutghen argues that illusionistic works were part of the general 18<sup>th</sup> century interest in illusionism that can be found in all aspects of High Qing culture. The general aesthetics of illusion was not limited to the imperial court. There was an increasing presence of theater and drama in everyday life, the publication of illusion-themed novels such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and the revival of anomaly accounts all point to a cultural climate where the ability to distinguish between illusion and reality was essential. How might the hazy clouds of the background of our Harvard print relate to these notions of illusion—especially if viewed in context of the architecture of the foreground?



## Rockery

Rockery is one of the key motifs in Chinese garden. Chinese garden crams a density of meanings into a very small space. There is a well-known passage from Shen Fu, an 18<sup>th</sup> century writer, describing the role of rockery:

In laying out garden pavilions and towers, suites of rooms and covered walkways, piling up rocks into mountains, or planting flowers to form a desired shape, the aim is to see the small in the large, to see the large in the small, to see the real in the illusory to see the illusory in the real.

Placed in a traditional courtyard, rockery satisfied people's desire to return to nature by offering them a representation of the natural setting. How then is the rockery in our print related to the greater sense of illusion within the work?

## Reflecting

We began this case study by first reading through the plot of *The Story of the Western Chamber* and then considering the relationship of perspective to the image. We ended by considering Chinese ideas of illusion. In interpreting our Harvard print in your own considerations for this case study, please reconsider how the tale is interrelated with Western visual conventions and Chinese pictorial traditions. Does this print remind you of any earlier paintings from previous case studies? What do you think is the relationship between the image and the written text? Would you understand the plot within our piece differently if the work was presented in a different format or setting?

## Terms to know

*Huan*: Literally meaning “illusion”, an illusory pictorial image.

*Panopticon*: A type of a building where individual cells do not interact with one another but are governed from an all-seeing tower.

*Perspective*: A mode of representation that translates three-dimensional objects into a two-dimensional plane.

*Xianfa*: Chinese term for linear perspective, translated as the “line method.”

### **Tools for New Discoveries**

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