CHAPTER SEVEN

VIEWING: PERCEPTIVE AND FLESHLY EYES

It is necessary that the audience should use ‘jumbo eyes.’

The ‘eye’ garners significant attention in Shuihu zhuan and Xiyou ji because the eye completes recognition and realizes theatricality. By emphasizing the viewer of the performance in their reflexive presentation of embedded theatricals, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers and commentators of Shuihu zhuan and Xiyou ji elaborate on and distinguish different modes of seeing and layers of audienceship. As we have discussed in Chapter 2, both the literal theater and theatrical spaces were often visualized as ‘places’ where the viewed interacts with the viewers. In our ‘prologue’ theatrical, it is the audience figure of Judge Cha who initiates a performance. The inclusion of intratextual viewers in Ming-Qing narratives establishes a distance between what is viewed and the viewer, the performance and the spectator. The full realization of the meaning of a theatrical is dependent on the presence of a viewer, which makes a theatrical a ‘viewerly’ event.

The idealization of ‘perceptive eyes’ had a long tradition within the rhetorical theme of recognition in Chinese literature. Over the course of the Ming, recognition and visuality became even more closely linked with the development of a distinctive visual culture and the rise of theatrical fiction. After contextualizing the late Ming and early Qing discourses on eyes, this chapter examines how idealized vision, or the ultimate eye, is embodied and particularized in Shuihu zhuan and Xiyou ji. The dissociation of visual acuity from morality and normative social hierarchy in Shuihu and Xiyou showcases the writers’ preoccupation with using the viewing element of ‘playful theatricals’ to establish and articulate a subversive ocular order.

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1 Kong Shangren 孔尚任, Taohua shan 桃花扇 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1998), p. 11.
The dynamic visual culture—theater, prints, paintings—in early modern China had a great impact on the habits of reading and writing fiction. The explosion of printed images in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries began an age marked by a “plentitude of pictures” with their characteristics of plurality and reproducibility. As Martin Jay demonstrates, the plentitude of images influenced the dawn of the modern era in Europe accompanying it with “the vigorous privileging of vision.” It would appear that a similar phenomenon occurred in early modern China. Pictures were endowed with meanings beyond their aesthetic or visual values; they were the conveyer of visual knowledge whose iconology was crucial for social order.

Perhaps the best early modern collection illustrating the attention to, and the privileging of, the visual and its attendant social functions is Sancai tuhui 三才圖會 (Pictorial compendium of the Three Powers, 1607). Wang Qi 王圻 (jinshi 1565) prefaced the book with a discourse on the importance of images:

I have read Han Qintai’s books in which he comments: Pictures help to establish nature and human relations, to exhaust numerous changes, and to examine both the abstruse and the subtle. He is exactly right! Indeed, pictures cannot be left out!

Wang Qi recognizes that visual knowledge, the ability to understand the iconology of images, is crucial for maintaining social order. He emphasizes the agency of human perception in viewing images: human desire to visualize co-exists with the appearance of things, especially biological beings (chong yu niao shou 蟲魚鳥獸). Wang Qi’s belief reminds

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