AGRICULTURAL ILLUSTRATIONS: BLUEPRINT OR ICON?

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Although the earliest Chinese technical writing on farming dates back at least as far as the late Warring States and visual depictions of farming tasks and tools proliferated from the Han period, agricultural illustration—the deliberate pairing of agricultural text with images or graphics—seems to have begun no earlier than the Song dynasty. One work produced at the beginning of the Southern Song, Lou Chou (or Shou)’s 樸瓊 Gengzhi tu 耕織圖 (Ploughing and weaving illustrated), and another produced in the mid-Yuan, Wang Zhen’s 王楨 Nongshu 農書 (Treatise on agriculture), launched the two predominant Chinese traditions of agricultural illustration.

The Gengzhi tu, presented by Lou Chou to the emperor in 1145, was originally designed as an album, a common artistic medium of the period consisting of a sequence of paintings on silk, each paired with a poem. It was subsequently reproduced in a range of media, including stone carvings, woodblock prints, and painted porcelain. Wang Zhen’s Nongshu of 1313 was in many respects a conventional, text-based agronomic treatise. However it contains a long section entitled Nongqi tupu 農器圖譜 (Illustrated register of farming tools) which was a complete innovation: for each item of equipment a drawing, deliberately technical in style, completes the prose explanation. The work was clearly designed specifically for the medium of woodblock printing, and subsequent reproductions or adaptations were all in that same medium.

Wang Zhen intended his visual-verbal depictions of technical devices to serve as the equivalent of blueprints, allowing officials to introduce more advanced technology to backward regions. Lou Chou’s work was intended to convey messages that were social and moral as much as technical: a primary concern was to foster a proper respect for the role that farming families played in sustaining the social order. Although in several cases Lou Chou’s very detailed paint-

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1 Lou’s given name can be pronounced either Chou or Shou; earlier scholars have usually preferred Shou (e.g. Kuhn 1976), but Chou seems now to be standard among historians in China (e.g. Wang 1995).
ings show more technical detail than the more schematic renderings of Wang Zhen’s *Register*, his more artistic choice of medium and style produced pictures that were closer to genre scenes than to blueprints.

From the perspective of how knowledge and governance are organised in the modern world, it might well appear that these two experiments with the visual rendering of technical knowledge should be treated as distinct endeavours. Yet despite their differences in conception and execution, the *Gengzhi tu* and the *Nongshu* shared a common goal. Both were intended to serve the overarching pedagogical purpose of “promoting farming”, *quannong* 勸農, a primary responsibility for anyone involved in imperial government. Exactly what place did technical illustration play in this project?

## THE GENGZHI TU AND ITS TRADITION: ICONS OF THE IMPERIAL ORDER

The Southern Song scholar Zheng Qiao 鄭樵 (1104–1162) completed his *Tongzhi* 通志 (Historical collections) in about 1150. The work contains a famous essay, the *Tupu lüe* 圖譜略 (A brief account of the graphic arts), in which Zheng analyses the relations between text and image and the role of each in conveying knowledge. At the time that Zheng was writing, the popularisation of woodblock printing had opened up new opportunities for writers on cosmology, mathematics, materia medica, building and other technical subjects to develop richer forms of communication through the use of diagrams, charts and illustrations. Zheng’s essay refers to several of these fields, but not to agriculture. In his recent study of the history of agricultural illustration in China, Zhang Zhongge takes this omission to mean that no agricultural illustrations had yet been produced, and certainly we have no evidence to suggest that the agricultural writers of Zheng Qiao’s time, Chen Fu 陳敷 for example, had begun to use illustrations to convey their ideas. But officials and emperors, it seems, were more adventurous. The notion of using images of farming for pedagogical purposes, whether or not paired with text, seems to have emerged during the later Song, and to have done so in the context of

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3 Chen Fu was the author of a short work on Southern rice farming, entitled *Nongshu* (Agricultural treatise) and prefaced 1149 (see below).