Images in Legal and Fictional Texts from Qing China

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The voluminous crime case records stored in the Qing Imperial Archives in Beijing (第一歷史檔案館) contain numerous murder case reports. Each such document combines a report on judicial procedures and conclusions, narratives of the crime — both through recorded testimony and the synopses penned by judicial officials — and descriptions of the condition of the deceased. Most contain images, or refer to standard graphic representations, of the human body. I come to this material not as a scholar of the practices of legal documentation in late imperial China, but as a student of vernacular fiction. In recent years I have been drawn to paratextual materials, commentaries, prefaces, and illustrations, and to the production and circulation of books as commodities, all in order to understand better the cultural practices of the Ming and Qing periods involving narrative texts. My purpose here is twofold: to explore the specific uses of images in non-fictional narrative texts, these legal documents from the Qing archives, and to compare their appearances, and apparent functions, with the uses of verbal pictures and illustrations in fictional narratives. I will concentrate on two kinds of images, tu 脳 illustrations and hui 繪 pictures and graphic verbal representations of objects and actions.

Standardized Visual Representations in Judicial Reports

Images were used in murder case reports to record the injuries suffered by a victim. In his widely read guidebook for local officials Fuhui quanshu 傅漢全書 ("The Path to Good Fortune and Kindness"), former county magistrate Huang Liuhong 黃六鶴 (1633-ca. 1710), describes what the presiding official must do when a complaint of murder has been brought to him:

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The magistrate must conduct the examination of the corpse at once. The magistrate goes to the examination site accompanied by the coroner and the clerk of the criminal section. During the examination it is pertinent to make sure the age and appearance of the deceased conform with those mentioned in the complaint. Then the magistrate examines the wounds of the corpse to see if they agree with those mentioned in the report and the complaint, noting carefully the color, shape, depth and length of the wounds. It is also necessary to compare the murder weapon with the wounds, to determine whether the wounds were really inflicted with that weapon, and to see whether the weapon is the same one mentioned in the complaint. It behooves the magistrate to decide which of the wounds was the fatal one. This is to be recorded clearly, for the ‘life for a life’ decision will be made.

Furthermore, Huang advised, “The record of wounds must be entered on the official document by the magistrate himself.” Clearly, conscientious legal practice required medical knowledge, at least forensic interpretation, for such cases.

The most prominent element in this advice is the emphasis on seeing. The magistrate was legally required to observe, closely, all the details outlined above: he was to compare a text describing the wounds in general terms—the formal complaint—with the wounds themselves. He was then to compare the wounds with the murder weapon(s). Finally, he was required to document with precision and accuracy just what he has seen. This documentation frequently included outline pictures of the human body on which were printed the medical names of the various locations that mortal wounds might be inflicted. Such images or diagrams, termed 刀圖, were accompanied by registers of these named locations on the body, termed 刀格. Both were forwarded upward through the judicial process; presumably some are preserved in the Archives today. Consideration of cases in which such diagrams are mentioned explicitly will clarify their function.

Among the Grand Secretariat Routine Memorials in the Qing imperial archives in Beijing, there is a case report dated 1738 concerning a murder committed by a Hunan man named Hu Gongcai 胡公才. It seems that the man’s older cousin, named Pan Longyi 蒲龍已, had become drunk and unruly. Hu and others had tried to calm Pan down, but to no avail. When Hu pushed him away, the drunken man fell and hurt himself—or so Hu was to testify. At this, Pan reportedly began to curse Hu’s parents in a deliberate effort to shame him. Finding his insults intolerable, Cousin Hu hit the drunken Pan with a table leg. Pan subsequently died of these injuries. When the magistrate received the coroner’s report he duly filled in and annotated (墜註) both the diagram and the relevant register.

2. Huang Liuhong 梁六鴻, Jiguan Fuhui quanshu 疊官福惠全書 (Jiuling, Lianxi shuwu 联系书屋, Kangxi 38 [1699]), 14.4b, in Guanzhen shu jicheng 官箴書集成 (Hefei, Huangshan chubanshe, 1997, Vol. 3, p. 366); translation from Huang Liuhung, A Complete Book Concerning Happiness and Benevolence: A Manual for Local Magistrates in Seventeenth-Century China, transl. and ed. Djiang Chuan 项端 (Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1984, pp. 323-24), except for the final line, which Professor Djiang translates as, “This is to be recorded officially as a basis for the decision later on for capital punishment in accordance with the principle that one must forfeit his life if he kills another.” Fuhui quanshu is indexed as No. 116 in the excellent Official Handbooks and Anthologies of Imperial China: A Descriptive and Critical Bibliography, ed. Pierre-Etienne Will (manuscript October 2001). This entry contains biographical information concerning Huang and extensive bibliographical notes on its many editions. I am greatly indebted to Professor Will for providing me with a copy of this work in progress. Jonathan D. Spence used this handbook as one of his primary sources in The Death of Woman Wang (1978; reprint New York, Penguin Books, 1979); see esp. pp. xiii, 9-19.
for the corpse (the tu and ge) to locate precisely each injury. Unfortunately, neither of those documents were included in the report available in Beijing today. We can only surmise what they might have looked like on the basis of their written synopses.

The tu and accompanying ge or diagrams of corpses indicating where injuries were found, seem all to be variations on the same models. These utilitarian images, all of them simple and unattractive, although clear, circulated in handbooks based on the famous Song period study of forensic medicine by Song Ci  宋慈(Song Huifu 宋父, 1186-1249), the Xiyouan jilu 洗冤集錄 (known in English as The Washing Away of Wrongs) of circa 1247. Versions of that basic text, with its illustrations, were printed regularly from the Yuan period onward; revised editions during frequently during the Qing period as new medical knowledge became available. In 1694 an official version was appended to the Qing Penal Code as a reference.

In an 1874 article, Herbert Giles said that the Xiyouan jilu was “always carried to the scene of an inquest by the high territorial official on whom the duties of coroner devolved.” The reasons are not hard to see. First, its diagrams of the body were sufficiently detailed to make precision in identifying the location of wounds seem within the grasp of the generally untrained functionaries (often undertakers) whose job it was to examine the victim’s remains. (Cf. Fig. 1 and Fig. 2: Front and back views of the human body.) Drawings similar to these had been in use since 1204 when a regional official proposed that inquest officials be provided with ventral and dorsal views of the human body on which to record wounds and injuries in red ink. Moreover, the Xiyouan jilu emphasizes just how important it was to take care with such examinations, a point made clear as well in the Qing penal code and reinforced, as we have seen, in handbooks for magistrates such as Fuhui quanshu.7

3. Neige iben Xingfu lei (Grand Secretariat Routine Memorials on Crime and Punishment)

4. Song Ci  宋慈, Xiyouan jilu 洗冤集錄 (Shanghai, Shanghai kexue jishu, 1981) is a modern typeset edition of the Yuan period copy at Beijing University. For information on the original handbook, see Official Handbooks and Anthologies, No. 318. For the 1694 edited and expanded edition, that was appended to the Qing code, entitled Liu lu guan jiaozheng 律例校正 與 Yuan lu, see Official Handbooks and Anthologies, No. 328. One updated edition is Chongkan banzhu Xiujuan lu jicheng 重刊編註 洗冤集錄, ed. Wang Youhau 王又枫, supvl. Li Gualan 李觀蘭, comm. Ruan Qixin 任其新 (1807; Yonghe, Taibei, Wanhai, 1968; Official Handbooks and Anthologies, No. 340), from which Figures 1 and 2 here are reproduced; it contains rhymes that serve as mnemonic devices for remembering the terms for body parts and the like. University of Illinois professors Chow Kai-wing and Cai Zong-qi inform me that the jingles rhyme fully only when recited in Cantonese; consequently this was a southern edition.


6. Sung Ts’u, Washing Away of Wrongs, p. 11: “a functionary called the wa-tso 孫考... performed the actual forensic procedures at inquests ... [They] were lowly figures, most often undertakers, and who might more accurately be called ‘coroner’s assistants’. They had none of the authority of ‘coroners’ as officials deputed by the king that English coroners had.

Fig. 1 - Front view of the human body from
Chongkuan baozhu Xiyuan tu zijheng 焦刊伏附uce徐ous子证, ed. Wang Youhua 王又鵷, suppl. Li Guanlan 李觀澐, comm. Ruan Qixin 阮其新
The report written by the magistrate in our first case concerning the injuries caused by the table leg reads, in part:

...broken skin in five places, continuous, unable to measure; mortal wounds from a fall; ...broken skin in one place, measured diagonally 9 fen long and 4 fen wide; and just below this, broken skin in one place, measured diagonally 7 fen long and 4 fen wide; mortal wood scrape wounds, bright red, toward the left kidney bright red with broken skin in one place, measured diagonally 1 cm 5 fen long, 4 fen wide; a non-mortal wood scrape wound; right buttock, toward the outside, bright red, outer skin broken in two continuous places, unable to measure; non-mortal wood scrape wounds, left buttock, close and low toward the outside, a purple red wound measuring diagonally 3 cm long and 2 cm wide, a wound from a fall; no other marks anywhere on the body. When the examination of the body that I had commissioned was complete, I personally examined the body and fully concurred with this report. Thereupon I filled out and annotated the diagram and register of body parts (tianzhu tuje), and I attest that the coroner did not disguise the contusions from any blows. I append those forms to this document.

One notices here the extreme precision of the description. Not only are the parts labeled by reference to the Xiyou jilu model image identified appropriately here, but also the variations away from the standard positions (as in “right buttock, toward the outside”). The magistrate seeks to create an authoritative representation through the use of exhaustive detail. His job is to see everything relevant to his case; his record confirms the precision of his observations. And his observations conform to the standard textual authority on which portions of the body can sustain mortal wounds. His primary “picture” is verbal, as appropriate for official communications which brook no ambiguity and that privilege texts over all other forms of representation.

In 1705 a double murder was committed in Zhejiang; the perpetrator of the crime was a man named Liu Qiyun. He had beaten, tortured, and starved two monks until they died. One of those monks was his brother, Liu Qixiang, who had taken the religious name Jiing. The other victim was an older monk named Jigong. A great deal of investigation was required to satisfy official participants at all levels of the review process; the report contains not only extensive testimony (kouguang 口供) taken by the local magistrate, the zhixian 知縣, but also testimony given at subsequent retrials during the judicial review process. The provincial anchashi 安察使 (Judicial Commissioner) concluded that Li Qiyun was a villain of the worst kind (qiongxiong ji'e zhi tu 刑荒極惡之徒) because he had killed his own brother in order to get a double share of the family property. Tragically, the older monk had been strangled merely because initially he had been mistaken for the brother. If this was been fiction, the narrator might have explained his death as karma, divine repayment for the sins of a previous lifetime, but the Qing legal officials concluded that it was a matter of vile greed on the part of the murderer.

Corporal descriptions in this second case are as detailed as in the first example here, and graphic to the point of being lurid. Because the murdered monks had been buried for several days—perhaps as many as five—by the time of the inquest, when the bodies were

9. Neige tibet Xingfa lei (Grand Secretariat Routine Memorials on Crime and Punishment) 519-57: Kangxi 賓熙 44.2.22 (1705) Guangdong: memorial by Secretary of the Board of Punishments 副都御史 Anzhi 安希錦 concerning a heinous murder 為凶殺生讞事.
exhumed in accordance with standard practice they had to be washed. Then they were examined. The report concerning the monk Jiijing reads:

已故僧僧開聞年五十五歲。體長七尺五寸。面黃色。兩眼微閉。口自出齒外七分
黑色。咽喉處頸麻腐烂半入肉內三分。\(^\text{10}\)

Jiijing, monk, deceased, ascertainment to be 55 years of age. Height 7 chi 5 cm; dark of complexion; both cheeks distended, tongue protruding between the teeth by 5 cm and black in color; a hemp rope bound around the throat and neck depresses the skin to a depth of 3 fen ...

The document continues in this vein, with numerous specific details that we, being outside the judicial setting, need not be told; we—and any other experienced reader—can imagine them clearly enough, about which function I will have more to say below.

Making Action Visible in Judicial Reports

Thus far I have been discussing one type of picture in the legal text, the physical image on which the victim’s wounds were symbolically inscribed and the redundant written record of the details. Now I want to shift to primarily *verbal* pictures in these case reports, the *hui* 詩 reportedly created by the oral testimony of the principals. And here forensic medicine gives way to the writer’s skill in verbal expression as narrative takes the place of description in recreating the facts of the crime.

In our first legal case the defendant Hu Gongcai tried valiantly to explain that the death occurred without premeditation, that it was accidental homicide. His testimony is so vivid, so filled with circumstantial detail, that one reviewer noted in his report, “That criminal’s testimony was just like a picture!” (*Gai fang gongtui ruhu* 詩犯供吐如 詩)

This is the testimony that provoked his remark:

。。。乾隆二年十二月三十日，報黃池已不知在那棄因，回家脫了短衣，止穿著
著衣減幅，往院子裏討問黃池，不知他罵的是誰。時有高尚學來尋他說話，他也不理，只是罵人。小的前去勸他，今日是面面，必不得往日。不要罵了。收拾睡覺。
他不但不聽，越發大聲罵罵。近的小的也罵起來了。小的道他罵，又去勸他。他
把身子轉過去了不罵小的，因對高尚學在旁邊勸他，他反罵他。氣煞得，慌用手在他背後推
了一把。他是醉酒的人，醉醉，就往地下一倒。因院子裏有許多柴枝堆著，他就倒
在柴枝上了。柴枝 somebody，又因他不穿著短衣，所以把右腿。右腿、右腿、右腿、右腿、右腿、右腿、右腿、右腿、右腿、右腿。他還不依，又
換住小的，用頭亂推。幸好小的父母大罵。小的把氣化起來，在泥在地上給蛆木板頭
頸，隨手打去。小的在左側角連太陽上。他鬆手往後一倒，又跌在柴堆上亂亂。
在左腿、左腿、左腿、左腿、左腿、左腿、左腿、左腿、左腿、左腿。小的在
不依，只是叫疼罵。小的因同高尚學把他扶進屋裏炕上。高尚學就去了。那時他
還是好好的。向小的還熱啓訴。小的也哭到今年正月初一日就不要兼東西。到初二早上
這話也沒說。小的見到樣子不好，連忙去通知脖頸，跟了小的家。第二天已經氣
絕了。小的原是因他罵小的父母，氣煞他打他一把，打了害，不意被賤棍害

10. *Neige itten Xingfa lei* 519-57, Kangxi 44.2.22.
11. *Neige itten Xingfa lei* (106 匹), Qianlong 1.24. It is significant that here the judicial officer, like the commentator for a work of fiction, seems to be praising the work of another person, here the oral explanation of the deponent. Of course, such testimony was heavily edited by the magistrates and their clerks to conform to accepted standards. That is, all local expressions had to be rewritten in *guanhua* 詩話 (“Mandarin”), all vulgarity, etc., had to be deleted, and the facts of the case must not be contradicted by the testimony as recorded. See Karasawa, Yasuhiko. "Hanako koto to kaku koto no wagaminato—Shindai shibun bunsho ni okeru kyōjutsushō no tekitsuto. Chigoku—shakai to bunka 中世的社会と文化 10 (1995), pp. 212-50; Matthew H. Somner, Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000), esp. pp. 14, 26-27.
On the night of the thirtieth of the twelfth month of Qianlong 2, Pan Longyi had already gotten drunk someplace else. I don’t know where, when he came home, took off his padded clothes and was cursing and shouting in the courtyard wearing only his thin shirt and thin pants (i.e., his underwear). But I don’t know who he was cursing.

“About that time Gao Shangxue had come over to talk with him, but he paid him no mind; all he would do is curse people. I tried to calm him down, and so I said, ‘This is New Year’s eve; it’s not like other days. Don’t go on cursing like that. Why don’t you get ready for bed?’ Not only would he not do what I said, he kept on cursing even louder. He even started cursing at me. I figured he was drunk, so I went to calm him down again. But he turned his back and paid me no mind. Since he cursed me despite my good intentions, I got so mad that I put my hands on his back and gave him a shove.

“He was so drunk that his legs were weak, and he fell down on his knees. Since there was firewood piled up all over the courtyard, he fell into it. He struggled to get up, but he rolled around in the firewood. And because all he was wearing was his undershirt and underpants, he got bruises and scrapes on his right knee, his right cheek, over his heart, on his lower right side, and other places. Gao Shangxue hurried over and helped him up, but he still would not calm down. He grabbed onto me again and started butting me with his head. And he brought up my father and mother and started cursing them.

“This made me even madder, so I picked a table leg made from a board up off the ground and hit him with it. Without meaning to, I hit him in the left temple and the side of his head. He let go of me and straightened up. Then he fell backwards into the firewood again and rolled all over, back and forth. He got scrapes from falling up and down both arms, on the left side of his ribs in back, on both sides of his butt, his neck, over his left kidney, his waist, and other places. That’s when he finally shut up and stopped cursing. All he could do is sit on the tire.

“Gao Shangxue and I picked him up again and carried him into the room and put him on the kong. Then Gao went away. He was still all right at that time, and he asked me for a sip of hot water. Who’d have thought that by the second of the new month he wouldn’t even be able to talk any more. As soon as I saw he was so bad, I went as fast as I could to report it to the local headman. But when he came with me to see, Pan Longyi was already dead.

“It was all because he brought up my father and mother and started cursing them that I got so mad that I gave him a shove. I hit him just once. I did not kill him on purpose. I only hit him on the head in one place; all the rest of them were scrapes that he got when he fell. Nobody else helped me hit him. This is the truth. Gao Shangxue can testify to that.”

What we have here is extensive explanations of actions and consequences. We readers even have the murderer’s own testimony about what he was thinking and why he lost his temper. (After all, he had previously testified, this fellow Pan was living in his house, presumably for free. And he did curse Hu’s parents.) But is it “like a picture,” a hui? The passage is not overburdened with visual imagery. Actually, in terms of plot, character, and motivation it seems more like a story, a dramatic piece of fictional narrative.

In our second case record the provincial Judicial Commissioner remarked, about the magistrate’s written report and the consistency of testimony at his level with the preceding hearings, “the whole affair was laid out like a picture.” (Qingshi li li ruhui. 情事歷史如繪.) His remark seemingly conveys his admiration at the completeness of the testimony. Even without the application of the instruments of torture, the principals in the case had confessed fully, in detail, about just what their roles had been. Their testimony was not graphic in the way that the description of the corpse was; instead this case report, too, contained all the elements of narrative: setting, characters, plot, dialogue—all as reported in testimony. From those depictions one could easily understand the friction between the brothers at their first meeting after several years of separation and how it erupted when the sensitive subject of family financial matters was brought up. One can
also understand the predicament of the younger members of the family when one uncle commanded them to beat up and then to bury a second uncle as well as an innocent monk brought along by mistake.

Interrogation of Liu Yusheng: “Why, on the second of the fifth month, did you go with Liu Chunfang to capture the monks, and later, when Liu Qiyun plotted to kill Ji Qin and Jigong did you not come forward but instead carried them out to bury them? Tell the truth.”

His testimony in reply: “On the first day of the fifth month I was in the fields planting rice seedlings; if my uncle Qiyun was beaten up by somebody I didn’t know anything about it. On the morning of the second Liu Chunfang came to call my older brother Liu Kongsheng and me to go with him to catch somebody. I didn’t want to go, but Uncle Qiyun was going to beat me. So that’s why I took a stick of kindling and went along with him. But I didn’t take any part in catching Ji Qin and Jigong and bringing them back. And I didn’t even go to look or plot with them or help them out.

“On the night of the seventh Uncle Qiyun together with Liu Chunfang strangled Ji Qin and Jigong and called Liu Kejung and the others to carry them out. And he came again to get me to go along. He wanted me to take along a hoe and a winnowing basket into the hills to bury them. It was all Uncle’s idea. I didn’t dare not do what he said.”

Surely the pressures brought to bear on this young man by his older uncle were easily understood by all who read the report: the narrative in the nephew’s testimony gains its effectiveness through reference to familiar kinship terms and through the specific details of how, and especially why, he participated. Brief though it may be, Liu Yusheng’s testimony is made vivid by the specifics of action, object, and motivations. He does not, however, directly answer the magistrate’s question, and this fact, too, suggests the family pressures to which the young man was subjected. It makes a more convincing “story” of his participation. But to clarify our view of the relationship between texts and the “picturing” the judicial officials perceived, let us compare these texts to other types of narration and their various forms of images.

The Limits of Illustration

Even though physical observation recorded as text and picture (tu) formed the basis for the investigation, the judicial reviewer clearly had easily visualized the scene based on the text that the magistrate had recorded in his report. Thus it might seem that in crime case reports text and images served as adjuncts each of the other, to be read together for mutual illumination. But the real situation is more complex, as we can see from our second case. What is relevant about this crime and its investigation is that the repeated interrogations yielded highly detailed testimony (characterized as hui), and the consistency of this testimony—and its specificity—created a sufficiently convincing narrative to convict a group of men for their participation in a brutal double murder.

How do these two differing types of images, tu and hui, function? Although the diagrams on which the magistrates indicated the injuries suffered by these murder victims

14. Neige tilen Xingfa lei 519-57, Kangxi 44.2.22. For his part in the crime, Liu Yusheng was subsequently sentenced to exile and a beating, with reductions because of his age and because he was only an accomplice.
were not attached to the case records that I examined, one can infer their use. It is clear from the basic figures in *Xiuyan jilu* that these graphic *tu* were not independent from language in any way; instead, the images are clearly dominated by text. That is, the images were not anatomically correct, but instead were more like schematic drawings. They only became meaningful in the context of the legal proceedings when they were circumscribed using the specific anatomical terms codified by forensic medical practice and formally recognized by the state through its judicial system. The figure adapted from the *Xiuyan jilu* may be a “dense, replete, analog symbol,” in the words of W. J. T. Mitchell, but the picture in the legal report of the injuries sustained by the victim was not authorized to be a complete symbol by itself. The sketch of the human body with indication of its wounds signifies in a legal sense only through reference to the body parts identified on that diagram and, more particularly, when contextualized by the accompanying judicial report. The written description is considerably more detailed; legally it has primacy in terms of authority. In short, the *tu* image served merely as a supplementary confirmation of the text. This we know, at the very least, from the conscientious preservation of the text even after the diagram has been lost.

And what of the *hui*, the detailed verbal representations of the events in these cases? One can only conclude that such *textual* pictures, which needed no explanation and could be corroborated merely by reference to the testimony of others, were in fact the more powerful tool for persuading the reader. To clarify the distinction, we must turn to fictional narratives current during the Qing.

**Visualized Pictures in Fictional Narratives**

The premodern Chinese writer who has written the most about the relationships between pictures and verbal narration is probably the fiction critic Jin Shengtian 廠(1608-1661). On many occasions throughout his lineal commentary to *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (Water Margin, or Outlaws of the Marsh in English translation), Jin comments on the graphic nature of the narrative text. One such case is the scene in Chapter 23 in which the brawny hero Wu Song kills a tiger with his bare hands.

武松走了一直，酒力發作，氣熱起來。一隻手提著哨棒，一隻手把胸膛前頂開，踏著踉蹌，直奔老亂樹林來，見一塊光滑大青石，把那哨棒倚在一邊，剎著身體，把手量了一丈，只見發起一陣狂風，那一陣風過了，只聽得亂樹詭後響起一聲響，跳出一隻環睛白額大懶蟲。武松見了，叫聲，啊呀！從青石上翻身跳下來。

After Wu Song had walked for a while, the strength of the wine became apparent. He began to feel scorchingly hot inside. With one hand carrying the club and the other opening up his coat at the chest, he stumbled and staggered, and blundered straight through a forest of tangled trees. He saw a high, smooth, blueish rock. He leaned his club against the side of the rock and was just about to lay himself down upon the rock to sleep, when there arose a violent gust of wind. After the gust of wind had passed, Wu Song heard a great crack behind the tangled trees, and out leaped a big tiger with slaming eyes and white forehead. Seeing it, Wu Song cried “Ah-ya!” and rolled down from the blue rock. Grasping the club in his hand, he dodged to the side of the blue rock.

Now this much is the text of a very famous scene from the novel. In its frequent use of verbs of sensory perception (especially *jian*, “saw,” but also *ting*, “heard”), the novel clearly differs considerably from the two types of pictures in the legal texts. There the text provides details to augment what has been seen by the writer and indicated on the legal *tu* image; in the verbal *hui* pictures, the descriptions of events are limited to only what is

relevant in order to confirm the basic charge in the case. Here, on the other hand, the text narrates a broader situation for which the reader must provide many of the details (the appearance of the mountain path, its trees and rocks, etc.) in order to visualize an unusual situation that he presumably has not seen, and that perhaps never could be seen. As Jin Shengtian says in his commentary on these lines,

已下人見神人，虎是活虎，驚者父子各欲出細細看，自常思覓虎有處看，真虎無處看，
真虎死處看，真虎活處看。活虎不走，或猶猶得一看，活虎正搏人，是斷斷必無處得看者也。乃今觀者忽然以筆筆畫，畫出全副活虎搏人圖來。今而後要看虎者，其索到水波傳中，榜陽溪上，定睛觀看。

From here on the man becomes a superman and the tiger a live tiger. The reader must pay very close attention from paragraph to paragraph. I have often thought that there are places to see a painted tiger, but none to see a live one; one can see a genuine tiger that is dead, but not one that is living; a living tiger walking can probably be seen occasionally, but a living tiger batting with a man—there are never places to see such a thing. Now suddenly in an almost casual way, [the author] with his pen has painted a complete picture of a living tiger batting with a man. From now on those who want to see a living tiger can all come to the Jingyang Ridge in Shuihu zhuan to stare to their satisfaction. 16

The reader could hardly avoid creating this scene in his imagination even without the commentator’s urging. Part of the appeal of the novel at this point is reading how the bumbling hero gets through this trial; he has just drunk many times the recommended amount of a very powerful wine. Surely the great foolishness of this egotistical hero and the absurdity of his situation guarantee that the reader will continue to read in order to find out whether the promised tiger does appear—and how Wu Song could possibly cope with it when it does. I submit that the power to cause a reader to visualize the scene is a function of its precise descriptive language, not only its specific nouns but its verbs as well. However, compared with the narrative of the manslaughter in the second legal case here, the novel’s narrative is very spare; its action moves very quickly, with great verbal economy on the part of the author. Because the novel is so well known, there is no need to explore its narrative techniques in any greater detail here; instead we must consider briefly how it readers were meant to respond.

16. Shuihu zhuan huiping ben 水滸傳會評本, ed. Chen Xizhong 陳思忠, Hou Zhongyi 侯忠義, and Lu Yuchuan 魯玉川 (Beijing, Beijing daxue, 1981), pp. 423-24; translation by John Wang in Chin Sheng-t’an (New York, Twayne, 1972, p. 77). In the “Li Zhi” commentary to the Rongyutang edition of Shuihu zhuan, the commentator also praises the novelist for creating what we might call word pictures:  

水滸傳文字形容巧妙，轉變又新，如此同文字。形容刻畫周細惟妙兼華處。已勝前史公一層，至其轉換到盡處處，寫寓出神入化手段。

“The writing of Shuihu zhuan is so splendid that its sequences of events [zhuanhuan] are divine; when it describes and pictures [ke hua] Zhou Jin, Yang Zhi, and Suo Chao it surpasses even that of the Grand Historian [Sima Qian]. And when the sequence of events comes to Liu Tang, its skill brings the divine into being.”

In Ma Tii the description, Shuihu ziliao huibian 水滸資料彙編 (Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1980, pp. 92-93); Shuihu zhuan huiping ben, p. 257. See also Chapter 9, the scene at the temple when Lin Chong awakens to find that the fodder let under his care has been set on fire by his enemies. As Lin Chong takes revenge by killing Lu Qian 萬全 and his collaborators, Jin Shengtian’s commentary frequently praises the writing, and the Rongyutang edition commentator repeats that it is “a picture” hua 萬. Shuihu zhuan huiping ben, pp. 215-16.
Controlling the Act of Reading

In response to the question, "How can we make the reader see?" the critic W. J. T. Mitchell has written:

The familiar answer of poets, rhetoricians, and even philosophers has been this: we construct a "visible language," a form that combines sight and sound, picture and speech—that "makes us see" with vivid examples, theatrical gestures, clear descriptions, and striking figures ... 17

Undoubtedly the language of the fictional Shuiliu is the language of the theater, in effect; its subjects were shared with theatrical performance, and the actions of its protagonists in written form are as grandiose as those onstage. By comparison, in those most dramatic confessions from crime case reports that judicial officials praised highly for being like pictures, the language is hardly less graphic, even if the gestures are less exaggerated and the outcome of the attack is far less unlikely than when an unarmed man fights a tiger. In practice, the narrative sections of crime case reports might even be more detailed than in fictional action scenes.

Mitchell warns his readers that what Western Romantics desired from imaginative reading was not the mere visualization that Jin Shengtan suggests. But the strategy of the 17th century critic of fiction was shared in large part with the authors of the Qing legal reports. That is, magistrates and their clerks had to convince their designated readers of the veracity of the events; these few readers were the judicial reviewers all the way up the administrative hierarchy including, at least in theory, the emperor himself. There could be only one way to read their narratives, and ambiguity would not serve their ends.18 These amateur writers had to persuade their potential critics of the validity of their investigations and their judgements, using the combination of illustrations and writing that promoted visualization. To achieve this end, specific verbal detail was required, not only to confirm the appearance of the victim (although that was important), but to narrate the actions of the perpetrator in committing the crime.

Success for the writer of fiction, and for the legal reporter at least as urgently, was a function of how effectively they could create verisimilitude. Those who crafted both forms of writing had to portray the mental states of the protagonists through their words and actions. What better way to achieve this goal than to transfer, rhetorically, the narrative function from magistrate (ostensibly merely the recorder) to the deponents who tell their own stories? When motivation as well as action are both depicted from the actor's own perspective, the narrative is more likely to be convincing—if there is corroboration for his account. This is undoubtedly why extended, and repetitive, testimony was included in crime reports in addition to the terse synopses of conclusions reached by the magistrate about the carefully documented facts of a case. Given such redundancy, the reader could "safely" visualize the scene, confident that he is "getting it right." These legal cases invite the reader to nothing less than complete agreement with


the investigators to reach the same conclusions. Their primary elements are the word pictures; the tu images offer ostensibly objective confirmations of the narrative.

Even though he may never see a tiger in combat with a man, most readers of the novel Shih-i zhuan would have seen at least crude graphic representations of a tiger (by the Qing, most printed editions of fiction were illustrated, see Fig. 3 for example). For some readers the illustration may have served the important function of providing, or corroborating, information about the appearance of the beast in question. On the basis of the narrative and the accompanying commentary, the reader of fiction could easily create a mental image of the fast-paced scene. For such readers, the quality of the novel’s illustrations (which, in some cheap editions, were very crude) was irrelevant; the printed drawing served merely to confirm the reader’s mental creation; it did not need to be an anatomically correct representation of a large cat.

Similarly, by relying on his previous experience, when he read the description of the fateful conflict and its lethal outcome, the judicial reviewer could visualize both the corpse as well as, especially through vivid hui or word-pictures, the events that resulted in homicide. Here, too, the tu served the function of confirming the information on the chart, but by design they were highly redundant with the narrative presented in the testimony. As in the Beijing Archives today, these pictures could be discarded without weakening the case.

Thus in fiction and legal report alike, the tu images are circumscribed by and subordinated to the text in degree of significance; both forms of writing depend on verbal description and narration, not on illustrations, for their effectiveness. With directions provided by the text, images serve merely to enhance and to shape the products of the readers’ imagination by augmenting and confirming the primary source of information here, the writing. In both cases the writers (either the magistrates and their clerks who drafted the crime reports or the fiction commentators including Jin Shengtang) sought to control how their texts—and, by extension, the illustrations—were read; both sought to promote a singular, authoritative reading.

Although the presentations of commentary on fiction and the various segments of a legal report vary considerably in their presentations, they represented similar approaches to interpretation. Readers of judicial reports, like readers of fiction, were expected to engage their own creative faculties to appreciate the full power of both types of texts (regardless of whether that power was meant to provoke a simple thrill of excitement or to confirm the details of a criminal action). Yet in both forms of writing, the readers’ imaginations were to be bounded by the verbal descriptions, where ultimately the authoritative signification in these combinations of text and images was concentrated.19

19. Even though Jin Shengtang does not address illustrations directly, and probably had no control over any illustrated edition (the first, Guaishu taol: 賛疏堂, edition to carry his commentary was unillustrated), his comments seem to preclude any alternative vision of the battle with the tiger. My final observations here are inspired by several sources, in part by comments by two other papers at the conference for which this was originally written, De l’image à l’action: la dynamique des représentations visuelles dans la culture intellectuelle et religieuse de la Chine / From Image to Action: The Dynamics of Visual Representation in Chinese Intellectual and Religious Culture, held in Paris in September 2001. These were Timothy Brook, “What are Chinese Pictures Pictures Of?” and Lucille Chis, “Text and Tu: Reading the Illustrated Page.” As I have on other projects, I have learned a great deal once more from these two outstanding scholars. Other writers I have found informative on these issues include Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984, Chapter 12, especially pp. 167-70); Chow Kai-wing’s forthcoming Publishing, Culture, and Power in Late Imperial China: The Making of a Post-Imperial Culture (draft, 2001, especially the Introduction); and Rolston, Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary; essays by Roger Chartier, in his Order of Books, esp. pp. 1-23, etc. In the above discussion, I have concentrated on pre-determined
Fig. 3 – “On Jingyung Ridge Wu Song Fights a Tiger,” from *Li Zhouwu xiansheng piping Zhongyi Shuihu zhuans* (Hangzhou) edition; reprinted in *Ming Rongyu tang ke Shuihu zhuans tu* (Beijing, Zhonghua, 1965, p. 23b).

Meanings inscribed into texts that seemingly preclude any alternative readings, despite the obvious fact that readers do indeed control their own readings; see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, esp. p. 174.