

# A Brief Analysis of the Text-Image Correspondence in Ming and Qing Illustrated Novels—Taking the “Seven Armies Flooded by Water” in the “Romance of the Three Kingdoms” as an Example

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## Abstract

“The Flooded Seven Armies” episode in Romance of the Three Kingdoms is an important plot point that frequently appears in the illustrations of the novel during the Ming and Qing dynasties. This paper analyzes illustrations from multiple versions of Romance of the Three Kingdoms from the perspective of the relationship between text and image, revealing significant inconsistencies between the illustrations and the text. Art history studies show that illustrations often combine multiple events within a single image, presenting a cross-temporal narrative structure. At the same time, some illustrations deviate from or misinterpret the original text, possibly due to the illustrators’ misunderstandings of the text or creative liberties taken during the artistic process. Taking the “The Flooded Seven Armies” episode as an example, the illustrations merge events occurring at different times, such as Guan Yu shooting arrows and Zhou Cang capturing Pang De, or depict scenes that do not appear in the original text. This study highlights the narrative innovations in novel illustrations during the Ming and Qing periods and their impact on the reconfiguration of the relationship between text and image.

## Keywords

“The Flooded Seven Armies”, Ming and Qing Novel Prints, Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Guan Yu, Relationship between Pictures and Texts

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## 1. Introduction

The “The Flooded Seven Armies” episode in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* marks a pivotal battle in Guan Yu’s campaign at Fancheng and has been widely depicted in illustrated novels and artworks during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Existing research has largely focused on the iconographic and symbolic significance of the painting *Guan Yu Capturing Generals* (Nie, 1981; Shao, 2015)—notably the version by Ming dynasty artist Shang Xi, housed in the Palace Museum—which is commonly believed to portray this episode. Scholars have approached the image through analyses of painting style, historical context, and folk beliefs such as the popular pro-Liu, anti-Cao sentiment (Hu, 2016). However, compared to the attention given to the image itself, systematic studies of the interaction between novel illustrations and narrative text remain limited.

In recent years, the relationship between text and image has become an increasingly important topic in intermedial narrative studies, gaining recognition within the field of premodern Chinese fiction. Nevertheless, for a widely disseminated and multiply illustrated work like *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, there is still a lack of detailed, version-based analysis regarding how illustrations present the story, whether they remain faithful to the text, and whether they introduce shifts in meaning during the process of transmission.

This paper explores these issues by examining the complexity of narrative strategies, reception mechanisms, and visual cultural transmission in Ming and Qing illustrations. It sheds light on the intricate interplay between text and image in traditional fiction, offering valuable insight into the evolution of narrative and the cultural dynamics of early visual storytelling.

## 2. The Battle of Fancheng in “Three Kingdoms”

In the *Records of the “Three Kingdoms”*, Guan Yu’s victory over Yu Jin at the Battle of Fan City primarily relied on a sudden downpour, but the “Water Drowning Seven Armies” was not depicted as a strategic maneuver. Nevertheless, Guan Yu’s swift capture of the opportunity by using boats to encircle the embankment suggests that it was not solely dependent on the weather, but also demonstrated his exceptional military acumen. This background likely serves as the foundation for the emphasis on the “Water Drowning Seven Armies” in *Romance of Three Kingdoms*, where the dramatic scene is highlighted to enhance Guan Yu’s heroic image and create a more striking visual and emotional impact.

## 3. Ming All This “Three Kingdoms” “Shuiyanqijun” Graphic Correspondence Relationship

Ming Dynasty, “Three Kingdoms” or “Three Kingdoms Biography popular Kingdoms”, etc., is to be adapted creation of the “Three Kingdoms” based on the novel, extremely large and complicated surviving version, this paper one of the more well-known wider spread of the Ming Dynasty nineteen years. “Three Kingdoms Biography popular Romance” (Luo, 1591), “The Biography of the Three King-

doms” by Lianhuitang in the 33rd year of Wanli (Luo, 1605), thirty-eight years Wanli Yang Chun yuan this “Three Kingdoms Biography.” (Luo, 1608) And the “Three Kingdoms map”<sup>1</sup> engraved by Huang in Anhui at the end of Ming Dynasty. Take an example to discuss the correspondence between pictures and texts in the section “The Seven Armies Flooded”.

1) Guan Yu, Zhou Cang and Pound—a combination form of narrative across time and space

Wanli nineteen years, “Three Kingdoms Biography Popular Romance,” a total of twelve volumes two hundred forty chapters, each time only with an engraving, across the two. In “Shuiyanqijun” a return of illustration, the right side of the page a long beard generals are on board bow Nock, should be Guan Yu, behind struggling boatman rowed; the left side of the page water tilt a ship, Cao give all flooded, striking is struggling water’s like there are two people fight, it should be Zhou Cang and Pound, seen here depicts Guan Yu, one of the navy ship boat knocked Pound, Pound Zhou Cang water capture of the scene.

It is worth noting that Guan Yu’s archery on the right page should be the scene in the text, “Hey, he is fighting forward, and Guan Gong’s arrow is shot in the water”. On the left page, Zhou Cangshui captures Pound here. In the subsequent incident, according to the text before and after the engraving, after Cheng He was shot to death by Guan Gong, “all the troops fell, and only Pound had a manpower battle”. When hundreds of troops in Jingzhou were driving a small boat near the embankment to catch Pound, Deti flew with a short knife. Yue boat in the morning, killing several people standing, everyone on board was down five hundred troops, Zhao busy so short, Ben Fancheng wants to, “Zhou Cang and then only from the upstream ride the ship killing to the Pound multiplied boat knocked, the Cao after another fell into the water, and personally under water captured Pound”.

Although this illustration is divided into two pages, the water pattern, the hull, and the clouds are connected to each other. It should be a complete scene. Compared with the original text of “The Legend of the Three Kingdoms” in the 19th year of Wanli, it can be found that the illustration is a combination of the two in this incident. Two intense scenes of different time and space are properly arranged in the same frame.

The embroidered image of the “Seven Armies Flooded in Water” in the “Three Kingdoms” carved by the Huang clan in Anhui at the end of the Ming Dynasty was obviously affected by this. The picture of the “Flooded Seven Armies” in Yixiangtang was flooded to the sky. Only some hilltops are exposed on the water. The barracks tents are looming in the water. There is a big ship in the middle of the picture. flag engine knife, visible should be Guan Yu, along Guan Yu watching the water eyes, and hands beside soldiers in sickle hook direction, you can see a boat rollover in the next, the water struggling who also when they were in fight, Zhou Cang should be in the capture Pound.

According to the description of the details here in “The Legend of the Three

<sup>1</sup>“Three Kingdoms map”, the late Ming Huang engraved this, the Congress Library.

Kingdoms” and other versions of the “Romance of the Three Kingdoms” in the Ming Dynasty, “the upper class will take a big boat and knock the Pound boat over, and both Pound and the sergeant fall into the water. the Pound jumped on board water captured on board”, shows that knocked Pound boat issue is your own boat to intercept Zhou Cang, Guan Yu was never involved. Yixiangtang is not drawn exactly as described in the text.

If Wanli nineteen years, “Three Kingdoms Biography Popular Romance” inset into the boat shot Guan Yu Ho, Zhou Cang ship captured at Pound across time and space screen design also looks a little stiff—for example, the figure Guan Yu Although being bow but I do not know the shot who in where—so there is no strict accordance with the “Three Kingdoms” text to depict the left Hong Domoto in, Guan Yu carrying bows station in the ship bow, and water capture Pound Zhou Cang two screens it appears very harmonious, this The first layout obviously inherits the cross-temporal narrative of “The Legend of the Three Kingdoms”, but on the one hand it weakens the plot of Guan Yu’s archery, while highlighting the commander Guan Yu status “Shuiyanqijun” of the war in the other hand has not lost sight of the battle captured Pound key plot, will be a success across time and space scene transformed into a narrative picture<sup>2</sup>.

2) there is no correspondence between pictures and texts

Lianhui Domoto and Yang Chun yuan this “Three Kingdoms Biography” in the layout and text content is quite similar, the sub-twenty volumes, a total of two hundred and forty, each page is the figure below, the two images were similar, the details slightly different, Many of the illustrations and text do not correspond to each other.

Lianhui Domoto and Yang Chun yuan this first illustrations are basically the same, painted Guan Yu watch forts in the mountain is surrounded by water, Lianhui Church of the problem, “Yu Wei Village Whitewater monstrous concept,” Yang Chun Yuan this question “Shuiyanqijun.” The content drawn here does not clearly appear in the text, but judging from its relatively high position, it should be an expression of Guan Yu’s knowledge that the place is called Huakouchuan<sup>3</sup>. The scene where Cao’s plan was broken afterwards.

Lianhui Domoto and Yang Chun yuan this second illustration is very similar, painted walls gates as water flooded, Lianhui Domoto also painted a boat, on board the soldiers as if under attack cities, Lianhui Church of the problem, “Kuan flooding FanCheng” Yang Chun yuan this question “flooded FanCheng”. However, the text corresponding to the position at the bottom of this picture is not flooding Fancheng, but Guan Yu built ships and boats and blocked the water mouth according to plan. Yu Jin belittled the news that Guan Yu’s army moved to the high ground, which led to the fact that the seven armies stationed in the camp were Flooded by water, the scene of flooded Fancheng painted in the picture originally happened after Guan Yu beheaded Pound.

<sup>2</sup>This is probably due to the fact that in some editions of The Romance of the Three Kingdoms in the mid-Ming Dynasty, the person who shot the arrow into He became Guan Ping.

<sup>3</sup>One talk about Jingkouchuan and Huokouchuan.

Lianhui Domoto and Yang Chun yuan this third map corresponding to the text describing the water war is Shuiyanqijun part, but both illustrations inconsistent. Two generals in the painting of Lianhuitang are attacking each other in their respective boats. The bearded man on the right is holding a long spear, and the man with a round face on the left is holding a long knife, and the title is “Guan Yunchang and Wei Zhanbingshui”. Judging from the appearance and appearance of the characters in the painting, both of them have no long beards, and the swords they hold do not see Guan Gong’s broadsword. It should not be Guan Yu. But from the relative position of the two ships of view, Zhou Cang driving the ship with the description of the vessel knocked Pound is quite similar, but the two facial features and Lianhui Domoto painted with three lock beard characterized Pound different.

Yang Chun yuan this third chart also painted two boats, the right side of the boat dressed in a gown generals who are being wrestled to the left side of the boat to catch, painting title “capture Pound Guan see the boat.” The scene depicted here should be the capture of Pound. However, the content of the picture and the title of the painting are all capturing Pound on a boat, and Pound is wearing a gown instead of armor, which is very different from the description of the capture of Pound in the water by the corresponding text.

Lianhui Domoto and Yang Chun yuan basically the same in this fourth graph. Depicted is five locks of beard Guan Yu sitting in the boat, was directing slasher beheaded kneeling in the bow strapped hands and head down the Pound, Lianhui Church of the title “Kung boat cut drink Pound,” Yang Chun Yuan this question. “Pound was unyielding to accept punishment.” This scene also differs greatly from its corresponding text content. First of all, the imprisonment in imprisonment and the beheading of Pound were completed after the flooding of the Seventh Army and returning to the high ground camp, rather than on the ship, as the text stated “Guan Gong drowned the Seventh Army and returned his troops to Gaofu Village. He sat in the tent, drinking a group of swords and pushing too much forbidden.” Secondly, Pound was more arrogant after being captured, “raising his eyebrows and anger, standing without kneeling” in Guan Yu. After demonstrating his willingness to surrender, Pound still “cursed endlessly”, which caused Guan Yu to be furious “to be executed and Pound to be tortured” instead of bowing his head and sitting down as shown in the picture.

Yang Chun yuan this “Shuiyanqijun” section of this end, the next page that is painted in Cao Ren Guan Gong arrows things, Lianhui Domoto is also one, painted city wide open, and the waters gush from two soldiers hurried escape, Titled “Sergeants escaped from each other.” The text in this picture should have been that after Guan Gong killed Pound, he took the water and did not retreat, then boarded the battleship and took the city straight to Fancheng. However, the text in the case of FIG soldiers fled their water does not appear, in contrast, Cho positive want to abandon the city when away, Man Chong put forward after the water potential will soon recede, followed by Guan Yu and Cao, Guan Yu can not cause aggressive, so Retreating is better than defending, Cao Ren listened to the

suggestion, and Shen Baima made his army prestige, only afterwards did the matter of Cao Ren's castle in Guan Gong.

In addition, the movements, clothing patterns, and appearance of the deserters on the left side of the illustration of "Sergeants Escape from Water" are very similar to those of the sword and axe in "Drinking Pound in the Long Ship". Guan Yu's actions in "Germany" are also similar to the picture of "Yunchang Seeing Book and Joy" in the following text, except that it is flipped.

Thus, Lianhui Domoto and Yang Chun yuan this "Three Kingdoms Biography" "Shuiyanqijun" with pictures similar, and almost no text description exactly as drawn, sometimes summarized the context, sometimes nothing, sometimes misinterpret the meaning, sometimes the exact opposite, it also proves that some of the Ming and Qing fiction prints painter when drawing illustrations may not understand the contents of the book, it is based mostly spread this powder, and therefore often repeated the baseless assertion.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

From the analysis of the corresponding relationship between the pictures and texts in the section "The Flooded Seven Armies" in the novel "The Romance of the Three Kingdoms" in the Ming and Qing dynasties, it can be found that the painter's in the woodblock prints do not necessarily depict a single scene. Instead, they may combine multiple scenes from the same event occurring at different times and places. This narrative approach may have influenced subsequent creative works on similar themes and could even give rise to new visual styles or storylines. Moreover, the prints in the novels do not always align perfectly with the text and sometimes exhibit significant discrepancies. The reasons for these differences could be, on the one hand, that the painter's prints may not have fully understood the content of the text, and on the other hand, that the illustrators often relied on circulating preparatory sketches, leading to the misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the content.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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