DECORATIVE SCHEMES FOR NEW MARKETS: THE ORIGINS AND USE OF NARRATIVE THEMES ON 17TH-CENTURY CHINESE PORCELAIN

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THE USE OF NARRATIVE THEMES TO decorate Chinese porcelains represents one of three major decorative innovations which distinguish 17th-century porcelains from a majority of the wares that preceded and followed them.[1] Narrative themes can be briefly defined as decoration containing figures of religious, cultural, or political significance derived from historical or fictional stories of China's past. Recent exhibitions and research have brought to light a wider variety of scenes from previously published sources and from a few newly-uncovered literary sources.[2] But others remain to be disclosed and their meaning to the contemporary Chinese consumer and connoisseur explored.

Figure 1. Washing the elephant. Brushpot decorated in underglaze blue, c. 1640. Private Collection.

The use of narrative themes to decorate Chinese ceramics originated well before the end of the Ming, probably in the thirteenth century, when potters used iron oxide glaze to decorate the non-imperial stoneware pillows, vases, and jars from the Cizhou area in north China.[3] By the 1350s, Chinese potters in Jingdezhen, the principal centre of porcelain production in southeastern China, were able to paint narrative scenes of incredible strength and character in cobalt blue on vases and on large lidded jars, called guans.[4] The scenes on Yuan guans and vases, like the scenes on the Cizhou pillows and vases, were based primarily on episodes from history and legend which had been preserved through story-telling or poems and official dynastic histories. These 'stories,' as the Chinese call them, sometimes formed the themes for plays during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), when Chinese drama came into its own, and some were turned into novels during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Some of these plays survived from the Song and Yuan as woodblock-illustrated books.[5]

The use of narrative themes continued on ceramics, but only infrequently, on the so-called 'windswept' guans and vases of the late 15th and early 16th centuries and on the fahua and the red and green guans and jars of the early and mid-sixteenth century.[6] None of these are 'imperial' wares. But the great majority of well-manufactured wares produced in Jingdezhen during most of the Ming, whether made for the Court or for non-imperial use, were decorated with imperial symbols or with flora and fauna and Chinese symbols relating to fertility and fecundity, rather than with narrative scenes.[7]

Narrative scenes emerged as a major source of decoration on Chinese porcelains only after the Wanli emperor emptied the imperial coffers and was thus forced to stop placing vast orders for the Court, orders which occasionally exceeded 100,000 vessels a year. These immense orders had to be produced in the much larger *min yao*, or people's kilns, as well as in the imperial kilns, so that by the 1570s, the Court's requirements had dispersed the emperor's patronage throughout the various workshops of Jingdezhen. Thus, when imperial orders slackened and then ceased late in the Wanli emperor's reign, the potters throughout Jingdezhen were particularly hard hit financially.[8] The loss of imperial patronage and the economic dislocation of the first two decades of the 17th century forced the potters and merchants of Jingdezhen to seek new markets, both foreign and domestic. The Japanese and the Dutch greatly increased their import of porcelain throughout the 1620s and 1630s.[9]

A second Chinese domestic market, composed of the literati-gentry and affluent merchants, represented an alternative market to that of the emperor and his court and had been developing self-consciously since the thirteenth century. The literati-gentry were landowners, often with connections in trade. Many of the gentry were or had been scholar-officials, who staffed and largely

Figure 2. Lu Dongbin descending on clouds. Detail of vase decorated in underglaze blue, c. 1690. Ex coll. S. Marchant.

controlled the imperial civil service, which administered the laws and government of China. By the 17th century, the literati-gentry supported a small army of artists and artisans who produced objects, such as woodblock-printed books and Yixing stoneware, which specifically reflected literati as opposed to imperial taste.[10] The ascendancy of literati taste, particularly in the field of painting and scholars' objects, was probably accelerated by the declining prestige of the emperor and court during the 16th and early 17th centuries.

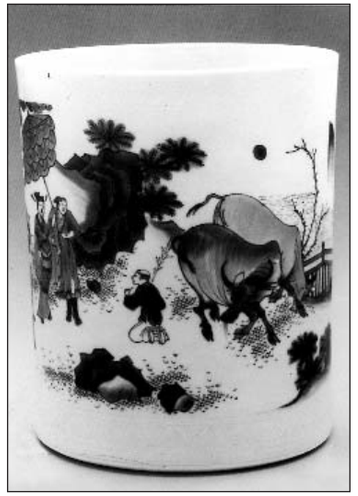

Figure 3. Xu You kneeling before the Emperor Yao. Brushpot decorated in underglaze blue, c.1640. Courtesy of S. Marchant and Son.

China's merchants also comprised a part of the potters' alternative domestic market. Merchants historically occupied the lowest rung on the Chinese social ladder, so in their search for respectability and acceptance, the merchant classes of 17th-century China emulated the life-styles of the literati-gentry, their social superiors, and intermarried with them. This somewhat amorphous grouping of scholars and merchants constituted the economic elite of the late Ming and represented a growing consumer group for the potters of Jingdezhen to appeal to.[11]

Perhaps the single most important cultural development which affected 17th-century porcelain decoration was the growing popularity of the woodblock-printed book,[12] which contained woodblock-printed illustrations which supplied the potters of Jingdezhen with a vast array of images after about 1625. So when the Chinese potters were forced to create new decorative schemes for an expanded domestic market after about 1620, the narrative scenes were present in the woodblock-printed books, and the markets for such porcelains were also in place.

The three new decorative schemes, landscapes, scholars' motifs and narrative themes, were purposely painted onto pots in order to appeal to the Chinese domestic market. To date, there is no proof that the literati-gentry caused these designs to be painted on porcelains,[13] and I am not arguing that everyone who bought these remarkable new porcelains understood every layer of meaning, including the poems by poets like Du Fu and Zhu Xi, the famous Song statesman and Neo-Confucian philosopher, that were sometimes added to the scenes on these porcelains.[14] But these new decorative schemes were used by the potters because they provided a vehicle to address political and economic issues of concern to the potential purchasers of these porcelains, the literati-gentry and their merchant-class emulators.

The poems, plays, novels, and religious icons which comprise the narrative themes and supplied models for the potters can be discussed in various different ways. I will first discuss Buddhist and Daoist deities and related symbolic scenes. Then I will deal with a few historical and pseudohistorical characters, and finally with three famous novels, two based on history, whose plots provided the decoration on so many of these porcelains.

Buddhist elements are relatively easy to discern. The 18 lohans, all of whom have attributes, like a tiger, or a fly whisk, are often shown in a garden, sometimes without their haloes. Then there is Budai, the Buddhist god of wealth and abundance, a squat, jovial figure often depicted with a canvas bag, his cornucopia of abundance. Bodhidharma, often depicted in woodblock-illustrated books and on porcelain descending the Yangzi River on a reed, is the first of the Chinese lohans. (The original 16 were Indian).[15] Bodhidharma, originally a sixth-century foreign master, became the primary patriarch of Chan or Zen Buddhism, noted for its instant spiritual enlightenment; its religious truth did not depend on scripture for transmission but was 'passed from mind to mind' leading back to the Buddha himself.[16] And finally, the Buddhist ritual of washing the elephant was depicted in a woodblock-printed book, Fang's Ink Cake Manual of 1588, as well as on 17th-century porcelains *(fig.1)*. The plate in the manual was designed by the Buddhist painter, Ding Yunpeng, who also painted several surviving hanging scrolls of the scene. This scene became something of a Ming scholars' conceit because the Chinese word for elephant, 'xiang,' is a rebus, or sounds like 'xiang,' meaning illusion, and sweeping the elephant became a scholarly pun on 'sweeping away [the] illusions of this world.'[17]

The Eight Daoist Immortals, who were rather like saints, are the most frequently encountered Daoist images on 17th-century Chinese porcelain. Almost all of them supposedly lived as mortals and later became immortal and were thus able to intercede magically on behalf of human beings. They all have their attributes: Liu Hai, for example, has his three-legged toad which spits golden cash. Liu Hai lured his toad out of the ground with a string of golden cash, hence Liu and his toad's association with affluence. The Eight Immortals

are usually pictured on a promontory standing to the right as the Daoist god of immortality, Shou Lao, descends from the heavens on his crane to the left. Some of the most effective images of the Eight Immortals date from the reign of the first Qing emperor, Shunzhi, from the mid-1640s through the early 1660s.[18]

Daoism, like Buddhism, and unlike Confucianism, which is more secular and related to ethics, is associated with an interest in the supernatural and the magical. Daoism approaches the unseen spiritual world in two ways. First, it "deploys an array of rituals to summon help in from the 'beyond' of the spirit world, either to help the individual or to help the community." Hence, the Eight Immortals and other Daoist 'functionaries,' including Shou Lao, the god of immortality, who personified magical Daoism's extreme concern with

Figure 4. Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. (Two depicted on reverse.) Cachepot decorated in underglaze blue, c. 1640. Private Collection.

both long life and immortality. Second, Daoism provided the believer with physical rituals designed to produce long life and/or immortality. Daoist alchemic and dietary practices actually led to the premature deaths of a number of Chinese emperors during the Tang dynasty.[19]

Three other noteworthy Daoist characters appear on pots. Laozi is often depicted on his blue ox, heading off to the realm of the immortals in the celestial 'West' of China. Laozi is Daoism's most revered sage and reputed author of the *Daode jing*, Daoism's fundamental text, which was thought to have been written in the fourth century B.C. Another is Lu Dongbin, one of the Daoist Eight Immortals. A number of published vases and a rolwagen are decorated with scenes from his adventures. Lu Dongbin was a student who went through a combination of the Labors of Hercules and the Temptations of St. Anthony, all in a dream, and then awoke a follower of the Dao. This story became the subject of a Yuan dynasty drama entitled the 'Dream of the Golden

Figure 5. Yang Family ladies training for combat. *Yang Family Generals*. Large dish decorated in rouge de fer, gold and enamels, c. 1730. Courtesy of S. Marchant and Son.

Millet.' By the 1430s, Lu's adventures comprised the murals of a whole building of the Yongle Temple, one of the most famous of Daoist monastery complexes in China. These trials are depicted on a splendid brushpot entitled 'Lu Dongbin Passes the Test.' Lu is almost always pictured in scholar's robes with a sword strapped to his back, sometimes descending from the heavens on a cloud *(fig.2)*.[20]

A third Daoist icon, a great favourite even in China today, is Zhongqui, the Demon Queller, who first became deified for chasing away the demons of the Tang emperor Xuanzong, or Minghuang, during the emperor's dreams. Zhongqui committed suicide on the Emperor's steps after failing the imperial examination. Zhongqui has been depicted by professional painters through the ages and, as on porcelains, he almost always appears with thick beard, sword, and hat with antennae, as well as with at least one demon.[21]

Narratives which could be characterised as pseudohistorical or historical provided another major source for decoration on 17th-century porcelain. Many of the characters in these stories were known to every Chinese with even the most rudimentary knowledge of China's past, and the stories about these men and women were used at least from the fourth century B.C. on tombs, in temples, on painting, and in literature to inculcate Chinese moral values. These stories tell us about the political dilemmas facing 17th-century China's educated elite living under a new, barbarian imperial house, the Manchu, or Qing, dynasty, and about the nature of Han, or ethnic, Chinese nationalism.[22]

Many of the tales about these moral exemplars were taken from ancient stories in the Daoist and Confucian

Figure 6. Lady Wenzhi bidding farewell to her sons. Detail of brushpot decorated in underglaze blue, c. 1640. Butler Family Collection.

classics, such as the writings of the Daoist *Zhuangzi*, of the fourth century B.C., and the Confucian *Records of the Historian*, written by Sima Qian, who lived from the second to first centuries B.C., and the *History of the Former Han*, written by Ban Gu in the first century A.D.[23] These stories are peopled by meritorious rulers from China's prehistoric past, that is, before 2100 B.C., and with scholar-sages whom the rulers begged to take over the rule of their kingdom, or to help them rule more sagely.

The issue of service to the emperor is brilliantly depicted in decoration derived from a chapter in the *Zhuangzi*, often translated as 'Giving Away a Throne.' The stories from *Zhuangzi* relate tales about a king or emperor visiting the countryside to beg a recluse to join his government. Because Daoist precepts asserted that government service might sully one's soul, the reclusive sage, like the fourth-century poet-official Tao Yuanming, should refuse to serve, rather than be sullied by the 'red dust' of the world. Furthermore, as Stephen Little pointed out in 1983, many of the sages approached by these legendary rulers gave the rulers rather rude replies, which fits in very well with the anti-imperial sentiment of the 17th century.[24]

One story which illustrates Daoist anti-imperial sentiment, frequently found decorating porcelains of the 1630s and 1640s, is the story of China's first sage-king from China's Golden or prehistoric, Age, Yao, who wanted to relinquish his throne because he thought his abilities were not up to the job. Yao went to see a former minister, Xu You, who had become a recluse and retired to the country to herd oxen *(fig.3)*. Yao asked Xu You to take over the reins of government from him, but Yao was a superb ruler, so Xu You protested vehemently that Yao needed no help from him to rule the kingdom. Xu You was in fact so alarmed by the prospect of involvement in government that he then rushed off to wash out his ears, which had been contaminated merely by hearing Yao's proposition. In a later embellishment of the story, Xu You's fellow ox-herder, Chao Fu, got angry at Xu You for polluting their stream by washing out his ears in it, and took his oxen upstream so that they could drink unpolluted water.[25]

By the end of the Ming, according to Stephen Little, these scenes from the *Zhuangzi* could 'be seen as satirical depictions of rulers whose moral virtue was less than adequate, for in many stories of this type the hermits openly mocked the [ruler's] offer.'[26] My favourite example of the rude reply is probably represented on a

Figure 7. Liu Bei with Cui Zhouping of Boling. 'Liu Xuande pays three visits to Zhuge Liang.' *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Dish decorated in underglaze blue, recovered from Hatcher wreck (lot 581, March 1984), c. 1643. Private Collection.

rolwagen from the Butler Family Collection taken from the *Zhuangzi* depicting the ruler Yu, founder of the Xia dynasty, of the twenty-first to sixteenth century B.C., and Bocheng Zigao, who was enfeoffed as a nobleman under the prior ruler, Yao, and had given up his title under Yu to take up farming. The same scene is depicted on a Cizhou pillow in the Henan Provincial Museum. Yu visited Bocheng as he was working in the fields to ask why he had forsaken government service. Bocheng curtly replied: "'When Yao ruled the world, he handed out no rewards and yet the people worked hard; he handed out no punishments and yet the people

Figure 8. Congming (Zhuge Liang) playing the qin. 'Empty City Strategy.' *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Dish decorated in underglaze blue, c. 1690-1700. Palace Museum, Beijing.

were cautious. Now you reward and punish, and still the people fail to do good… The disorder of future ages will have its beginning here. You had better be on your way now — don't interrupt my work.'" The story ends: 'Busily, busily, he proceeded with his farm work, never turning to look back.'[27]

The presence of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove on 17th-century pots is an example of a subtle change in the meaning of the sages' roles as icon by the 17th century, a change which also characterises other Chinese iconic figures which ultimately appear on porcelain *(fig.4)*. The sages, who lived in Luoyang in the late third century A.D., were opposed to many Confucian proprieties, but also opposed the prevailing magical Daoist mumbo-gumbo of the period. During their lifetimes, the Seven Sages were scholar-eccentrics famous for following their own lifestyles, including inebriation, and religious and political convictions. But within a century, the Seven Sages had become role models to the Chinese specifically for resisting the tyranny of a usurping dynasty. Their leader, Xi Kang, who was related to the Wei dynasty, helped pay for a military effort to suppress the Sima clan's opposition to the Wei dynasty, for which Xi Kang lost his head when the Sima clan succeeded in capturing the throne from the Wei. In the late fourth century, when Luoyang fell to the Xiongnu, a 'barbarian' people from the North, the northern emigre population who came south to escape the barbarians fashioned the Seven Sages into heroes who had resisted the political and moral pressures of their times, even at the expense of their heads. This iconographical metamorphosis accounts for the presence of the Seven Sages on the fabulous tomb tiles from a late fifth- or early sixth-century tomb now in the Nanjing Museum.[28] The Seven Sages ultimately came to represent moral exemplars of correct behaviour for the Ming *yi-min* and are very frequently depicted on 17th-century porcelain.

Women from history and 'pseudohistory' are also depicted on Chinese porcelain through the use of decorative schemes involving foreign barbarians and Han Chinese definitions of Chinese nationalism, two issues of great importance to the literati, particularly after 1644. The Yang family women, taken from the *Yang jia jiang* or *Yang Family Generals*, are Northern Song women depicted on 17th-century pots training for military maneuvers to fight the Liao, northern 'barbarians' who conquered part of North China in the early tenth century *(fig.5)*. The Yang family women were forced to fight the Liao because their 'menfolk' had

Figure 9. Zhang Shun (White Fish) and Zhu Wu (Skillful Strategist). The *Water Margin*. Dishes decorated in underglaze blue, c. 1645-60. Courtesy of Berwald Oriental Art.

been decimated fighting the barbarian foe. The ladies are pictured on porcelain even in the early 18th century; they became paragons of patriotic heroism to those Chinese who still wished to resist, even if passively, the barbarian Manchu, or Qing dynasty.[29]

Lady Wenzhi, an historical character of the Han dynasty (220 B.C.-222 A.D.), appears on 17th-century porcelains as an exemplar of Chinese nationalism. She was kidnapped by the Southern Xiongnu — a tribe which ultimately became known as the Huns — and spirited away from Henan to Inner Mongolia, where she was married to a high military official, with whom she had two sons. Twelve years later, her father, a high scholar-official in China, managed to ransom her, and after an agonising but quick decision, she decided to return to China, leaving forever her husband and two sons.

From the fourth century A.D., when her story was included and two poems by her published in the *History of the Later Han*, Lady Wenzhi became an embodiment of 'the superiority of Chinese civilisation over the culture beyond [its] borders,' as well as of one's Confucian obligation to one's parents and nation. In a Tang version of her poems which appear on a later

handscroll in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Lady Wenzhi referred to the immense difference between barbarian and Han Chinese lifestyles. 'Spring water [that is, her return to China] cleanses a jade which had sunk in the mire [her life among the Xiongnu]. As I hold towel and comb, I rediscover the good rituals and etiquette; Touching the [*qin*] again enables me to live or die without regret.' A brushpot of about 1640 in the Butler Family Collection illustrates Lady Wenzhi taking leave of her two sons *(fig.6)*. Two scenes on a vase in an American private collection represent scenes nine and ten of the Southern Song handscroll at the Metropolitan Museum, on one side, of two warriors shooting at a bird, on the other, of Lady Wenzhi holding her baby son in a yurt. The decoration on this late 17th-century vase and on the Butler brushpot evoked the meaning of being Han, or ethnic, Chinese in an empire ruled by the 'barbarian' Qing dynasty.[30] Lady Wang is another Han dynasty lady pictured on a famous Yuan guan. She was married off to a Xiongnu prince in an attempt to improve China's relations with this Northern tribe, much to the sorrow of the Lady and her attendants, who were thus fated to live their lives outside the pale of Chinese civilisation. I am not sure that it is always possible to tell the two ladies apart, but they both convey the same message.[31]

Perhaps the most famous Ming dynasty novel, based on a Yuan drama, is the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which provided the potters with many decorative schemes and is about the attempted unification of China.[32] The *Three Kingdoms* concerns the period after the fall of the Han dynasty in 222 A.D., when China was divided into three parts: the North, the Southeast, and the West. Three men took an oath in a peach orchard to fight and die as brothers in order to reunite China under a revived Han dynasty. One of the three was Guan Yu, a warrior who was deified as the God of War, Guandi, by the sixteenth century. The second was Zhang Fei, a pig butcher. The third was the principal hero, Liu Bei, a kinsman of the Han dynasty imperial house and head of the Wu kingdom, comprising southeastern China. The earliest cyclically-dated example of a narrative scene used to decorate a 17th-century porcelain depicts one of Liu Bei's generals, Zhao Yun, riding into the sunset with Liu Bei's son and heir tucked into his breastplate, chased by the soldiers of the evil northern general, Caocao, who was Chairman Mao's favourite national hero.[33] The popularity of the *Three Kingdoms* in the 17th century is certainly related to the ideal of a unified China, united under an ethnic Chinese ruler. Liu Bei is pictured on numerous 17th-century pots, often in a scene taken directly from a plate in woodblock-printed editions entitled 'Liu Bei Vaults the River Tan.'[34]

Liu Bei was a fairly unsuccessful military commander who, realising that he needed a good strategist, went

Figure 10. 'Hongniang in the dock.' *Romance of the Western Chamber*. Dish decorated in underglaze blue and copper red, c.1670. Private Collection.

out to the countryside three times to entreat the scholar-official Zhuge Liang, also known as Congming, to serve the cause of reuniting China by enrolling as his chief advisor *(fig.7)*.[35] Zhuge Liang, or Congming, is one of China's most admirable characters; in the 17th century, he became a favourite hero to the literati-gentry because he was incredibly successful at using his intellect to turn near-disaster to its best advantage, a trait which many of them were also forced to cultivate. An episode known as 'Empty City Strategy' illustrates Congming's mental agility *(fig.8)*. Congming's forces had dwindled to a few hundred soldiers, and the enemy general, Suma Yi, depicted on a piebald horse, was closing in. To trick Suma Yi, Congming sent four small soldiers to sweep in front of the open city gates and sat on the ramparts above a gate drinking wine and strumming his lute. The enemy general took it for a trap to capture and kill him and galloped away, not knowing that Congming's city was almost empty of troops.[36]

Another popular source of 'stories' depicted on 17th-century porcelain was the *Water Margin*, (or *All Men Are Brothers*).[37] The novel is based on legends about a real band of outlaws from the marshes in Shandong province, who were led by Song Jiang during the reign of the Northern Song emperor Huixong who reigned from 1101 to 1125. The novel's popularity in the late Ming was undoubtedly due to the fact that the heroes of the *Water Margin* had supposedly been driven outside the law by corrupt Song officials, who by the 1620s had become analogous to the corrupt officials of the Ming dynasty. These bandit heroes became so popular by the late Ming that men adapted the heroes' names as

Figure 11. Yingying and Hongniang burning incense. *Romance of the Western Chamber.* Dish decorated in underglaze blue, recovered from Hatcher wreck (lot 580, March 1984), c.1643. Private Collection.

nicknames, much to the Imperial Court's alarm, so in the early 1640s, the Chongzhen emperor forbad the novel's publication. The decoration on a frequently-illustrated brushpot is based on a late Ming edition of the novel and depicts an outlaw leader, Wang Qing, being ferried across a river by fishermen to escape the corrupt Song officials who are chasing him. Between the 1620s and 1650s, the principals in the *Water Margin* were illustrated in numerous editions of the novel as well as on playing cards designed by Chen Hongzhou, the famous Suzhou painter. A group of blue and white dishes from the late 1640s or 1650s *(fig.9)* and *famille verte* dishes of the 1670s and 1680s depict the *Water Margin*'s heroes in military attitudes.[38]

Perhaps the single most frequently used source of narrative decoration in the 17th and early 18th centuries and the most famous of all Chinese romances is the *Romance of the Western Chamber*, or the *Western Wing*, a Yuan play based on a Tang dynasty story.[39] The play is about a love affair between the scholar, Zhanggong, who comes to stay in the western wing of a monastery, and the heroine, Yingying, who has also found shelter at the monastery with her mother and her maid, Hongniang, after the death of her father, a high scholar-official. The play went through many editions in the Ming. One popular edition had plates designed by the renowned eccentric painter Chen Hongzhou, and another, the 1640 *Min-Qiji* edition, is an early example of colour printing which influenced the evolution of Japanese woodblock prints.[40] Woodblock-printed books served as obvious prototypes for this decoration on porcelain.

The frontispiece of the most beautiful edition of the *Western Chamber*, the 1640 *Min-Qiji*, printed in colour, is doubtless responsible for the Long Eliza, Yingying, depicted on a large basin of underglaze blue and copper red produced in about 1660 and now in the Butler Family Collection.[41] In the scene referred to as 'Beauty's Enchantment,' Yingying and her maid, Hongniang, encounter the student hero, Zhanggong, with the abbot of the monastery, in front of the temple. Two large dishes from the Butler Family Collection illustrate 'Beauty's Enchantment,' one in underglaze blue and copper red oxide dated 1673, the other in *famille verte* enamels.[42] A number of smaller dishes illustrating scenes from the drama are cyclically dated to 1666 and 1668. Another scene, 'Evocation of the Spirits,' decorates dishes from the late 17th century. The heroine's

Figure 12. Yingying and Hongniang burning incense. *Romance of the Western Chamber.* Cizhou ware pillow inscribed by Wang Family, Jin dynasty (1115-1234 A.D.). Shanghai Museum.

mother, Yingying and her maid and the student, Zhanggong, are celebrating a mass for Yingying's deceased father. The plate entitled 'Hongniang in the Dock' taken from an edition of 1659, inspired the scene on a blue and copper red 12-inch dish made in the early 1670s *(fig.10)*. Yingying's mother is castigating Hongniang for encouraging the lovers' trysts. Two small dishes from the Hatcher wreck of circa 1643 show Yingying in the monastery garden thinking about Zhanggong and Yingying and her maid burning incense in the garden.[43] A larger dish from the Hatcher wreck also illustrates the latter scene *(fig.11)*, as does a Cizhou pillow from the Shanghai Museum *(fig.12)*. And finally, on a dish and two vases of the 1650s, Zhanggong rides off to take his examinations in hopes of returning and marrying Yingying, who watches with her maid from a balcony. The play ends happily; Zhanggong is pictured on porcelain returning in triumph from his examinations to marry Yingying.[44]

This short essay includes a brief summary of a few of the major types of narrative themes which decorate Chinese porcelains of the 17th century. Because of their universal appeal, these themes were also depicted by Zhe School (Ming professional and court) painters, so Zhe School paintings have provided an important new source for decoding the porcelains. Just as the lively painting and vivid colouration of these porcelains delights the eye, the iconography of their decoration intrigues the mind. Indeed, the narrative themes which decorate these 17th-century porcelains evoke the major historical changes and moral issues which characterise one of China's most cataclysmic centuries.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Mrs. Christine Crumlish Joyce for her assistance and to Katherine Wetzel, Richmond, Virginia, for the black and white photographs. Thanks also to Mr. Stuart Marchant for obtaining transparencies from which Katherine Wetzel produced *figure 5*.

Notes

1 See, for example, essays in Stephen Little, *Chinese Ceramics of the Transitional Period: 1620-1683* (New York: China Institute in America, 1983), p. 8 ff., and Julia B. Curtis, *Chinese Porcelains of the Seventeenth Century: Landscapes, Scholars' Motifs and Narratives* (New York: China Institute in America, 1995), p. 17 ff.

2 See Stephen Little, 'Narrative Themes and Woodblock Prints in the Decoration of Seventeenth-Century Chinese Porcelain,' in Sir Michael Butler, *et al.*, *Seventeenth-Century Chinese Porcelain from the Butler Family Collection*, pp. 21-32 (Alexandria, Va.: Art Services International, 1990); Hsu Wen-chin, 'Fictional Scenes on Chinese Transitional Porcelain and Their Sources of Decoration,' *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* No. 58 (1986): pp. 1-146; Craig Clunas, 'The West Chamber: A Literary Theme in Chinese Porcelain Decoration,' *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, vol. 46 (1981-82): pp. 69-86.

3 See, for example, Roderick Whitfield, 'Tz'u-chou Pillows with Painted Decoration,' in *Chinese Painting and the Decorative Style*, Colloquies in Art and Archaeology in Asia, no.5, ed. Margaret Medley (London: Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, 1975), pp. 74-94; Yutaka Mino, *Freedom of Clay and Brush through Seven Centuries in Northern China: Tz'u-chou Type Wares, 960-1600 A.D.* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1980), pls. 57-60; Robert Treat Paine, Jr., *Chinese Ceramic Pillows from Collections in Boston and Vicinity*, *Far Eastern Ceramic Bulletin* vol. VII no.3 serial no.31 (September 1955): pls. 40, 41.

4 See J.M. Addis, *Chinese Ceramics from Datable Tombs and Some Other Dated Materials* (London and New York: Sotheby Parke Bernet, 1978), obj. no.30; Henry Trubner, *et al.*, *Treasures of Asian Art from the Idemitsu Collection* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1981), cat. no.23; *Gems of China's Cultural Relics 1990* (Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1990), cat. nos.179-80.

5 See Liu Wu-chi, *An Introduction to Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966).

6 For examples of 'windswept' porcelains, see Wang Qing-zheng, *Underglaze Blue and Red* (Shanghai and Hong Kong: Shanghai Museum and The Woods Publishing Co., 1987), cat. nos.73-5, 89, 143, 156; for fahua, see Madeleine Paul-David, *et al.*, *Oriental Ceramics, the World's Great Collections*, vol. 7: *Musee Guimet, Paris* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1981), colour pls. 19, 80, monochrome pls. 58-61, 74-5; for red and green guans, see Madeleine Paul-David, colour pl. 30.

7 For examples of Wanli imperial wares, see Rosemary Scott, *Elegant Form and Harmonious Decoration: Four Dynasties of Jingdezhen Porcelain* (London and Singapore: Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art and Sun Tree Publishing Ltd., 1992), cat. nos.90, 100; *In Pursuit of the Dragon: Traditions and Transitions in Ming Ceramics* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1988), cat. nos.66, 68, 74.

8 Margaret Medley, 'Organization and Production at Jingdezhen in the Sixteenth Century,' in *The Porcelains of Jingdezhen*, Colloquies in Art and Archaeology in Asia, no.16, ed. Rosemary E. Scott (London: Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, 1993), p. 73.

9 Masahiko Kawahara, *Ko-sometsuke*, 2 vols. (Kyoto: Kyoto Shoin Co., Ltd., 1977); *The Inter-Influence of Ceramic Art in East and West* (Tokyo: Idemitsu Museum of Arts, 1984).

10 For examples of literati taste, see Chu-tsing Li and James C.Y. Watt, eds., *The Chinese Scholar's Studio: Artistic Life in the Late Ming Period* (New York: Asia Society Galleries and Thames and Hudson, 1987).

11 For a longer version of my argument, see essay in Curtis, *Chinese Porcelains*, pp. 15-17.

12 On woodblock-illustrated books, see Soren Edgren, *et al.*, *Chinese Rare Books in American Collections* (New York: China Institute in America, 1984); Nancy Berliner, 'Wang Tingna and Illustrated Book Publishing in Huizhou,' *Orientations* 25 no.1 (January 1994): pp. 67-75; Xia Wei, 'The Huizhou Style of Woodcut Illustration,' *Orientations* 25 no.1 (January 1994): pp. 61-6.

13 Two literati ordered specific ceramics in the late Ming. Mi Wanzhong, a scholar-official of the late Wanli (1570-1628) and one of the Four Great Calligraphers of the Ming, ordered porcelains from Jingdezhen when he was Provincial Judge of Jiangxi Province, between 1621 and 1625. Three of these porcelains survive; see Curtis, *Chinese Porcelains*, cat. no.28; *Gugong bowuguan cang ciqi xuanji* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1962), pl. 70; *The T.T. Tsui Museum of Art* (Hong Kong: T.T. Tsui Museum of Art, 1991), no.92. And Chen Jiru, eminent scholar-painter, ordered Yixing wares from the famous potter, Shi Dabin. A teapot in the Asian Art Museum dated 1609 by Shi Dabin attests to this patronage. See Stephen Little, 'Mi Wanzhong and the Use of Woodblock Designs on Chinese Transitional Porcelains' (Paper submitted to the Bluett Centenary Award Competition, December 1984), pp. 9-10, illus. 11a-b; Terese Tse Bartholomew, *I-hsing Ware* (New York: China Institute in America, 1977), p.24.

14 See, for example, Curtis, *Chinese Porcelains*, cat. nos.4, 25, 36, 46, 48.

15 For examples of lohans, see Marsha Weidner, ed., *Latter Days of the Law: Images of Chinese Buddhism, 850-1850* (Lawrence: Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1994), cat. nos.15-22; for Budai, see Butler, *Seventeenth-Century Chinese Porcelain*, cat. nos.25, 31, 106; for Bodhidharma, see Edgren, figs. 23a-b; Christie's, *Fine and Important Late Ming and Transitional Porcelain* (Amsterdam, 14 March 1984), lot 578.

16 See T.H. Barrett, 'Religious Traditions in Chinese Civilisation: Buddhism and Taoism,' in *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives of Chinese Civilisation*, ed. Paul S. Ropp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p.153.

17 See Weidner, cat. no.67.

18 For further description of the Eight Immortals and their

attributes, see C.A.S. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, 3rd rev. ed. (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, 1941; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1976), pp. 151-56; T.C. Lai, *The Eight Immortals* (Hong Kong: Swindon Book Co., 1972), pp.1-29. For examples on porcelain, see Butler, *Seventeenth-Century Chinese Porcelain*, cat. nos.56, 69, 76, 102, 111; Curtis, *Chinese Porcelains*, cat. no.35.

19 Barrett, p.150.

20 For further description and illustration of Laozi, see Stephen Little, *Realm of the Immortals: Daoism in the Arts of China* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1988), cat. no.1. For Lu Dongbin, see Richard Fu-sen Yang, 'Lu Tung-pin in the Yuan Drama' (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1955), pp. 24-67; S. Marchant and Son, *Exhibition of Chinese Blue and White – Wan li to K'ang hsi* (London, 1980), cat. no.13; *The Yongle Palace Murals* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1985), pp.77-98.

21 For further description of Zhongqui, see E.T.C. Werner, *A Dictionary of Chinese Mythology* (New York: The Julian Press, Inc. Publishers, 1961), pp.97, 98-100; for example on porcelain, see Sir Michael Butler, *et al.*, *Chinese Porcelain: The Transitional Period, 1620-1683: A Selection from the Michael Butler Collection*, comp. Princessehof Museum (Leeuwarden, The Netherlands: Princessehof Museum, 1986), cat. no.71; in painting, *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting: The Collections of the Nelson Gallery — Atkins Museum, Kansas City, and The Cleveland Museum of Art* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1980), cat. no.91.

22 For a more thorough discussion of these political dilemmas, see Curtis, *Chinese Porcelains*, pp. 27-9, and cat. nos.54-63, 65.

23 Burton Watson, trans. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, Records of Civilisation: Sources and Studies, no.LXXX (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968). Burton Watson, trans. *Records of the Historian: Chapters from the Shih Chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969). Pan Ku, *Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China: Selections from the History of the Former Han*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).

24 Little, *Chinese Ceramics*, cat. nos.20, 51.

25 Little, *Chinese Ceramics*, cat. no.20; Butler, *Seventeenth-Century Chinese Porcelain*, cat. no.99; Scarlett Ju-Yu Jang, 'Ox-herding Painting in the Sung Dynasty,' *Artibus Asiae* 52 no.1/2 (1992): p. 55; Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, pp. 32-3; Alan J. Berkowitz, 'Patterns of Reclusion in Early and Early Medieval China: A Study of the Formulation of the Practice of Reclusion in China and Its Portrayal' (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1989), p.95n.

26 Little, 'Narrative Themes,' p.23.

27 For a discussion of Bocheng Zigao, see Little, *Chinese Ceramics*, cat. no.20.

28 For information on the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, see Richard B. Mather, 'Individualist Expressions of the Outsiders during the Six Dynasties,' in *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Daoist Values*, ed. Donald J. Munro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), p.201; Miranda Shaw, 'Buddhist and Taoist Influences on Chinese Landscape Painting,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49 no.2 (April-June 1988): pp.188-89; Curtis, *Chinese Porcelains*, cat. nos.58, 59. For examples of porcelains, see Curtis, *Chinese Porcelains*, cat. nos.58, 59; Richard S. Kilburn, *Transitional Wares and Their Forerunners* (Hong Kong: The Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong, 1981), pls.93, 95, 182. On the Nanjing tomb tiles, see Audrey Spiro, *Contemplating the Ancients: Aesthetic and Social Issues in Early Chinese Portraiture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 4-7, 46-61.

29 See Edward J. Sullivan, *et al.*, *The Taft Museum: Its History and Collections*, vol. 2, D: *Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Taft Museum, 1995), pp.586-87; David T. Johnson, 'Narrative Themes on Kangxi Porcelains in the Taft Museum,' *Orientations* 25 no.8 (August 1993): 32-3. The Groninger Museum, Groningen, Netherlands, has a large polychrome and underglaze blue lidded jar of the 1650s or 1660s decorated with mounted Yang family ladies practicing for combat. The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Md., has a similar jar missing its lid in underglaze blue (49.1530).

30 Robert A. Rorex and Wen Fong, trans. and eds., *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute: The Story of Lady Wen-chi* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974), poems 9, 10.

31 For illustration of Lady Wang, see Trubner, cat. no.23. The scene on a Cizhou pillow in the British Museum has been taken for both. See Mino, fig. 160 and note, p.146.

32 Lo Kuan-chung, *Three Kingdoms: China's Epic Drama*, trans. and ed. Moss Roberts (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); Luo Guanzhong, *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel*, trans. and ed. Moss Roberts (Berkeley and Beijing: University of California Press and Foreign Languages Press, 1991).

33 For illustration of 1625 brushpot, see Duncan Macintosh, *Chinese Blue and White Porcelain* (Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1977), pl.44.

34 Hsu, pls.56-8.

35 A later scene from the same chapter, 'Liu Xuande pays three visits to Zhuge Liang,' decorates a Yuan guan sold at Sotheby's, Hong Kong, November 1, 1994, presently on loan to the British Museum.

36 Luo Guanzhong, pp.733-35.

37 Shih Nai-an, *Water Margin*, trans. J.H. Jackson, 2 vols. in 1 (Shanghai; reprint, New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1968).

38 See Little, *Chinese Ceramics*, cat. no.21; Little, 'Narrative Themes,' pp.25-6; for examples of *famille verte* dishes with *Water Margin* characters, see John Ayers, *Far Eastern Ceramics in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: Sotheby Parke Bernet, 1980), colour pl.58; Paul-David, monochrome pl.121.

39 See Clunas '1981-1982'; a recent translation is Wang Shifu, *The Moon and the Zither: The Story of the Western Wing*, ed. and trans. Stephen H. West and Wilt L. Idema (Berkeley: University of California, 1991); Little, *Chinese Ceramics*, cat. nos.54, 55.

40 For a discussion of the various editions of the *Western Chamber*, see Edgren, p.33, and Clunas, pp.71-5.

41 Sir Michael Butler, 'The Butler Family Collection Supplement to the 1990 Catalogue,' *Collections Baur* 58 (Automne-Hiver 1994): pl.13.

42 Butler, *Seventeenth-Century Chinese Porcelain*, cat. nos.125, 136.

43 Christie's, lots 201, 580; Julia B. Curtis, 'Transition Ware Made Plain: A Wreck from the South China Sea,' *Oriental Art* New Series XXXI no.2 (Summer 1985): figs.14, 18a.

44 Marchant, cat. no.26; Curtis, *Chinese Porcelains*, cat. no.64.