

A study on the construction of architectural landscape visual schemas in illustrations of Suzhou drama printed editions in the Ming dynasty

*Chan Chen, Huachun Cui**

School of Design, Jiangnan University, Wuxi, China

*Corresponding Author. Email: 584362153@qq.com

Abstract. (1) Background: The Ming dynasty represented the peak period in the artistic development of drama printed editions, with Suzhou editions being particularly representative. In the course of localized evolution, these illustrations not only absorbed the brushwork techniques of the Wu School of painting but also integrated the literary sensibilities and aesthetic ideals of Suzhou-based writers, thereby forming an aesthetic character that combined literati elegance with secular expressiveness. In terms of visual representation, Suzhou illustrators and engravers paid particular attention to the depiction of Jiangnan garden landscapes. According to statistical analysis of more than 200 surviving illustrated drama printed editions from Ming-dynasty Suzhou, architectural landscape images account for 98%, making them the dominant visual type in regional printed illustrations. Taking this corpus of architectural landscape illustrations as its research object, this study explores their visual construction logic and spatial patterns within the developmental trajectory of printed drama illustrations. (2) Methods: This study adopts an integrated methodological approach combining iconographic analysis and visual narrative theory. Through documentary research and textual verification, it examines the contextual conditions underlying the formation of architectural landscape visual schemas. Case study analysis is further employed to investigate the morphological typologies and visual rhetoric embodied in these images. (3) Results: Architectural landscape illustrations exhibit clear characteristics of formalization in terms of schema typology, compositional structure, and layout conventions. Their representational language, decorative motifs, and spatial organization collectively enhance the immediacy and lyrical quality of the image–text narrative system. These features reflect deeper cultural tendencies in Ming society, particularly the growing emphasis on individual emotional expression and the aesthetic refinement of everyday living spaces. (4) Conclusion: Influenced by the emergence of early capitalist economic forms and the convergence of elite and popular cultural traditions, architectural landscape schemas in Ming drama printed editions extensively assimilated techniques from traditional painting as well as engraving practices associated with the Jinling and Huizhou publishing schools. Drawing upon Jiangnan gardens as their primary visual prototype, these illustrations established a distinctive visual paradigm for architectural landscape representation. At the narrative level, they were profoundly shaped by the concept of expressive representation (*xieyi*) and literati aesthetics, achieving both the visual translation of textual narratives and the construction of poetic aesthetic realms within the visual narrative field.

Keywords: drama printed edition illustrations, Ming-dynasty Suzhou, aesthetic characteristics, poetic space

1. Introduction

The fundamental concept of the schema can be traced back to the philosophical traditions of ancient Greek thinkers Plato and Aristotle, particularly their theories of Forms and abstraction. Ernst Gombrich defined the schema as a learned formula gradually formed through the development of classical art, which is continuously modified and transformed in response to evolving contextual conditions. The artist's use of schemas, in philosophical terms, may be understood as an attempt to represent universals [1]. As a branch of printmaking art, illustrations in printed editions share with other forms of traditional Chinese art the characteristic of employing gradually established formal conventions to serve specific cultural purposes. Their primary concern is not the permanence of the image nor purely narrative representation, but rather the evocation of a poetic state of mind. In order to construct such "poetic" environments, illustrators and engravers of Suzhou drama printed editions in the Ming dynasty incorporated the aesthetic characteristics of local garden architecture into their spatial representations. As a result, a large number of architectural landscape schemas emerged in Suzhou drama printed illustrations, serving as fundamental visual units that supported both narrative and non-narrative imagery within printed editions. From the perspective of visual presentation, engravers employed highly refined techniques that combined intaglio and relief carving, achieving the effect of "using the brush in place of the knife" to vividly render real-world scenes on the printed page. Through careful consideration of formal structure and the adaptation of compositional models derived from traditional painting, these illustrations not only embodied the refined aesthetic sensibilities of the literati but also reflected the broader cultural tendency in the Ming dynasty toward the convergence of elite and popular taste. From the perspective of visual narrative, architectural landscape schemas provided spatial frameworks that enabled the development of character representation and the progression of narrative events. At the same time, they contributed significantly to the increasing literati orientation and aesthetic refinement of Suzhou printed drama illustrations.

2. Causes for the formation of architectural landscape schemas

The development of Suzhou drama printed edition illustrations occurred later than that of major publishing and engraving centers such as Jinling, Huizhou, Jianyang, and Wulin. Their techniques and stylistic characteristics only gradually stabilized and matured during the mid-to-late Ming dynasty. Distinguished by their refined and elegant architectural landscape imagery, Suzhou printed illustrations gained commercial success by catering to the flourishing social culture of art collection during this period. The emergence of a large number of architectural landscape schemas in Suzhou drama printed illustrations resulted from a complex interplay of factors. On the one hand, the gradual decline of the feudal state led to a loosening of cultural restrictions, while reforms in the household registration system increased social mobility. More fundamentally, however, two key structural forces underpinned this phenomenon. First, the rise of the commodity economy provided the economic foundation for large-scale garden construction, thereby supplying real-world architectural prototypes for visual representation. Second, shifts in social stratification gave rise to changing aesthetic preferences, resulting in a cultural tendency toward the convergence of elite and popular taste. In response to this trend, publishers increasingly incorporated garden imagery—embodying literati elegance and refined cultural sensibilities—into printed illustration design. These two dimensions collectively reveal the underlying causes for the formation of architectural landscape schemas.

2.1. The prosperity of the commodity economy and the emergence of early capitalism

In the early Ming dynasty, Suzhou's economy was primarily based on sericulture and cotton textile production. However, due to the government's restrictive commercial policies and the devastation of cities in the aftermath of war, commercial activity remained relatively underdeveloped. The regional economy continued to follow the traditional model of urban centers dependent on surrounding agricultural production, with crops cultivated locally and transported via canal networks for trade with other regions. By the mid-to-late Ming dynasty, however, not only had the commodity economy flourished, but signs of early capitalist development had also begun to emerge. Suzhou's commercial prosperity was closely linked to its favorable geographic location and transportation network. The Jiangnan region was characterized by dense water systems and flat terrain, supporting a large number of towns evenly distributed along the shores of Taihu Lake. By the late Ming period, Suzhou Prefecture alone contained seventy-two market towns, forming an interconnected economic network. These towns gradually became specialized in distinct productive functions, maintaining close interdependence and collectively forming an integrated industrial chain. Within this system, certain towns emerged as fixed distribution hubs and commercial centers, further consolidating industrial growth and economic vitality [2].

This thriving urban economy and expanding commercialization attracted significant investment from wealthy merchants. At the same time, Suzhou's advantageous geographical setting and scenic natural environment made it an ideal place for residence. Wealthy elites, drawing upon the region's natural landscape, invested substantial resources into the construction and renovation of private estates, fostering the development of a sophisticated garden culture. These gardens, in turn, provided essential visual and conceptual source material for the creation of Suzhou drama printed illustrations.

2.2. The cultural trend of the convergence of elite and popular taste

Transformations in social hierarchy and the rise of new intellectual movements inevitably reshaped the cultural climate, giving rise to a trend toward the convergence of elite and popular culture during the mid-Ming period. One of the most significant manifestations of this convergence was the commercialization of art. As the urban middle class accumulated wealth, cultural consumption became an essential component of daily life, creating a broad market demand. Members of this class increasingly turned their attention to cultural practices and collectible objects traditionally associated with refined literati taste, such as epigraphic rubbings, seal carving, theatrical performance, poetry composition, and garden construction. In response, literati and merchants actively commercialized these cultural forms. Artistic production mediated through paper became particularly suited to commercialization, as woodblock printing enabled the mass reproduction and wide dissemination of images at relatively low cost. Even traditional painting, once defined by its uniqueness, became subject to reproduction. Many painters adapted to these changes by becoming professional artists or directly participating in engraving and printing industries, responding to the erosion of artistic exclusivity and elite cultural distinction. The commodification of art forms once reserved for elite circles reflected a broader trend toward the materialization and objectification of literati aesthetic values during the mid-to-late Ming period.

At the same time, the secularization of subject matter, style, and technique in painting further challenged traditional distinctions between elite and popular culture. Influenced by human-centered philosophical currents such as the School of Mind, literati painters increasingly turned their attention toward everyday life. Their artistic focus shifted from the detached and idealized imagery of lofty mountains and flowing waters to vivid depictions of urban society and worldly experience. Moreover, Wang Yangming's core philosophical principles—"the extension of innate knowledge", "the unity of knowledge and action", and "closeness to the people"—

along with the teachings of thinkers associated with the Taizhou School, including Wang Gen, Li Zhi, Huang Zongxi, and Gu Yanwu, emphasized the legitimacy of ordinary human desires and daily life. These ideas challenged the orthodox Neo-Confucian doctrine of suppressing human desires in favor of abstract moral principle [3]. The spread of such humanistic thought contributed to the downward diffusion of knowledge in the late Ming period and fostered greater intellectual engagement with the lives of common people. Urban culture increasingly gained recognition within literati consciousness, and literati cultural production inevitably absorbed elements of popular sensibility. This dynamic process of intellectual and cultural transformation was vividly reflected in the visual language of printed illustrations.

In summary, by the late Ming dynasty, the boundary between elite and popular culture had become increasingly blurred, giving rise to new patterns of cultural consumption. As the social composition of audiences and participants in illustration production became more diverse, Suzhou publishers raised their standards for both the technical refinement and conceptual depth of printed illustrations. Using garden architecture as a visual prototype, they presented the refined lifestyles of elite society to a broader urban audience. This approach not only satisfied the literati desire for cultural expression and social distinction but also fulfilled the aspirations of urban residents for participation in an idealized, aesthetically refined way of life.

3. Image types and stylistic characteristics of architectural landscape schemas

Although architectural landscape schemas appear in great abundance in illustrations of Suzhou drama printed editions of the Ming dynasty, they display highly pronounced characteristics of formalization. This formalization may be examined from two primary dimensions—typology and stylistic features. Through systematic observation and analysis, it becomes evident that this formalization is manifested not only in engraving techniques but also in the architectural forms, compositional principles, spatial organization, and categorical diversity of the depicted landscapes.

3.1. Schema types and characteristics

From its establishment in the Spring and Autumn period through the Ming and Qing dynasties, Suzhou consistently cultivated a tradition of garden construction modeled upon natural landscapes, earning its reputation as a "city of gardens". During the Ming dynasty in particular, Suzhou contained as many as 271 residential gardens [4], reflecting the Ming literati's profound aspiration for an idealized pastoral mode of life. The extensive presence of garden architecture provided a rich and tangible foundation for illustrated scene construction, offering abundant visual references for engravers and illustrators. Architectural landscape imagery thus emerged as the most distinctive and regionally characteristic schema type in Suzhou drama printed illustrations. Influenced by the refined artistry of Suzhou garden design and the region's picturesque scenery, the proportional relationship between figures and their surrounding environment in these illustrations closely resembles that found in traditional landscape painting. These images are characterized by diverse architectural forms, rigorous spatial organization, and flexible compositional arrangements. Such features not only provide elegant and believable living environments for narrative characters and plot development but also introduce new possibilities for compositional structure and the dynamic interplay of black-and-white visual contrasts inherent in woodblock printing. More specifically, architectural and natural landscape elements exerted a defining influence on the typological formation of illustrated imagery. Architectural elements commonly depicted include pavilions, towers, terraces, belvederes, waterside pavilions, corridors, and bridges. The incorporation of these architectural forms not only signals the aesthetic refinement of printed illustrations

but also serves to visually translate and concretize the textual content of dramatic narratives. Natural landscape elements, by contrast, include trees, flowering plants, distant mountains, water features, and rocks. These elements enrich the decorative quality and vitality of the composition, while living vegetation in particular functions as a seasonal indicator, subtly conveying the passage of time. The integrated use of architectural and natural landscape elements embeds the lived environment of Ming-dynasty Suzhou into the visual language of printed illustration. At the same time, it strengthens the spatial and temporal construction of dramatic narrative settings, enhancing both their visual coherence and expressive depth.

3.1.1. Architectural schemas

The architectural types represented in Suzhou drama printed illustrations are diverse and structurally distinctive. In the Ming dynasty, Ji Cheng systematically summarized the forms, functions, and characteristics of various garden buildings in his treatise *The Craft of Gardens*. In practice, illustrators selected architectural types according to the number of figures, narrative requirements, and compositional principles. By exploiting the functional and formal differences among architectural structures, they enriched illustrated scenes and enhanced their visual recognizability. Shifts from one architectural setting to another further served to suggest changes in the psychological states of characters and, implicitly, of the author. As illustrated in Figure 1, the background of these prints no longer retains the conspicuous stage-prop conventions characteristic of early theatrical performance, nor does it function merely as a backdrop to highlight figures. Instead, emphasis is placed on the integration of human figures and environment, with architectural settings functioning to articulate emotional atmosphere. These architectural schemas may be broadly categorized into two types: semi-enclosed and open. The semi-enclosed type is primarily represented by multi-story structures such as towers and belvederes. Towers typically feature doors and windows on the front and rear façades but no windows on the sides, while belvederes have doors and windows on all four sides. Figures are generally positioned on the second level, visible through open windows or doorways. The ground floor is often closed off or partially obscured by vegetation or enclosing walls, creating a semi-private spatial environment. Within such compositions, figures inside the building maintain a certain spatial distance from those outside, visually reinforcing social hierarchy. The elevated placement of interior figures often conveys noble status, depicted from a slightly downward perspective in scenes of banquets, boudoir gatherings, or contemplative gazing over railings. Encircling clouds and rhythmically arranged trees accentuate the architectural height and the cultivated refinement of the figures, producing an atmosphere of ethereal tranquility. The deliberate placement of figures at elevated positions is conceptually significant. As Craig Clunas has observed in his discussion of garden painting, "height" may be equated with a point of inspiration or enlightenment [5]. In traditional elite culture, access to gardens symbolized cultural distinction; elevation signified moral integrity, social status, and reflective engagement with history. Thus, vertical hierarchy in the illustration functions not merely as spatial arrangement but as symbolic representation of ethical and social elevation. Architectural forms also serve as compositional devices to segment the pictorial field into smaller spatial units. In *Newly Engraved and Annotated Romance of the Western Chamber*, for example, the spatial configuration of a tower divides Cui Yingying and Hongniang into foreground and background zones. Cui Yingying occupies the front space, gazing into the distance with body language that conveys emotional longing, while Hongniang appears in the rear space engaged in domestic tasks. Their respective activities correspond to their spatial positions within the architecture, subtly indicating hierarchical distinctions between principal and attendant. The engraver further exploits the structural characteristic of windowless side walls to manipulate black-and-white contrast: the solid lateral surfaces are rendered with dense intaglio lines, while the figures framed by doors and windows are treated in relief against reserved blank space, creating a dynamic interplay between solidity and void.

Open architectural schemas are distinguished primarily by their functional attributes. Pavilions are open on all sides and lack a fixed roof form; xuan structures are typically built on elevated ground or beside water, with windows but no doors; waterside pavilions are constructed near ponds or streams for cooling and leisure; corridors are elongated and winding, covered with continuous roofs; bridges vary in form, though Suzhou gardens frequently employ arched bridges to connect segmented spaces. These structures are designed for temporary rest or leisurely viewing rather than habitation, and therefore generally lack enclosed doors or solid walls. The structural diversity of such open forms—including balustrades, moon gates, and lattice windows—allows for the suspension of curtains and decorative elements while simultaneously maintaining visual permeability. This permeability makes it possible to depict both figure activity and distant scenery within a unified composition. Open architectural types are frequently used to represent scenes involving multiple figures, with architectural layout guiding and organizing human movement. A representative example appears in *The Legend of the Mandarin Duck Ribbon*, depicting Yang Zhifang's wedding procession. The elongated corridor frames and directs the procession, conveying both the festive liveliness of the ceremony and a pronounced sense of spatial depth. All figures are situated within the corridor's spatial structure, while trees and ponds are divided into foreground and background zones. Through this compositional strategy, architectural form, natural elements, and human activity are seamlessly integrated, enhancing the poetic resonance of the image.

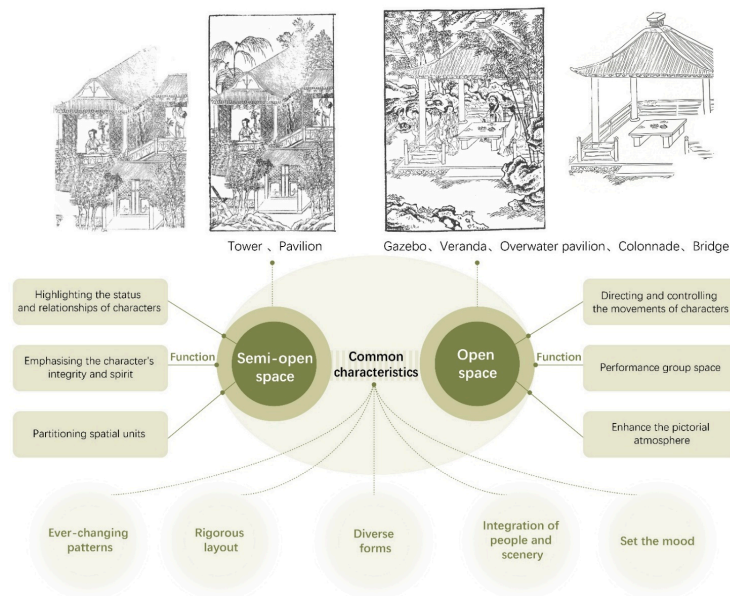


Figure 1. Functions and characteristics of architectural schemas (Source: Illustration by the author)

3.1.2. Landscape schemas

In addition to garden architecture, Suzhou drama printed illustrations extensively incorporate natural landscape elements to embellish the pictorial field and enhance narrative atmosphere. The forms of these natural elements are not arbitrary; rather, they are derived from specific plant varieties cultivated in garden design and from observable natural scenery. The most frequently employed landscape schemas may be classified into five categories: trees, flowers and grasses, distant mountains, water, and rocks, as illustrated in

Figure 2. On the one hand, organic elements such as trees and flowering plants constitute the primary components of natural landscape representation in printed illustrations and often occupy the largest proportion of the pictorial space. Their engraving techniques are highly varied, and they serve important compositional functions, including differentiating foreground, middle ground, and background, as well as partially obscuring figures to create spatial layering. In combination with flowering plants, these elements can indicate seasonal setting and temporal context, while also serving as subtle symbolic reflections of character traits. As a result, Suzhou drama printed illustrations depict a wide range of arboreal forms, including tall trees, flowering trees, shrubs, and clusters of grasses. Pine, bamboo, and plum—collectively known as the "Three Friends of Winter"—appear with particular frequency in both winter and summer scenes. Their elongated trunks contribute to the directional flow of the composition and reinforce the structural coherence between architecture and landscape. At the same time, these plants function as culturally codified symbols, suggesting qualities such as resilience, moral integrity, and purity. In autumn scenes, parasol trees and maple trees are commonly represented, evoking poetic associations such as Bai Juyi's line in *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*: "When autumn rain falls, the parasol leaves descend", thereby creating an atmosphere of melancholy and emotional longing. Summer scenes often feature banyan trees and lotus flowers, conveying a sense of lush vitality and radiant warmth. Spring scenes, by contrast, display greater botanical variety, including peach blossoms, willow branches, redbud, orchids, and hollyhocks, which surround figures and architectural structures, enriching the decorative complexity of the image. On the other hand, inorganic elements such as mountains, water, and rocks are equally indispensable. Freely shaped rocks, in particular, serve to disrupt rigid compositional regularity and introduce a sense of visual dynamism and rhythmic balance. Water surfaces perform a similar function while also allowing engravers to control areas of blank space with flexibility. Moreover, the depiction of water reflects the distinctive geographical identity of Jiangnan as a water-based landscape. In engraving technique, water is commonly rendered using either net-like linear patterns or curved lines, conveying variations in depth and the movement of waves. In addition, Suzhou drama printed illustrations frequently depict gently sloping hills, riverbanks, and sandbars. These landforms work in conjunction with architectural and aquatic elements to organize spatial zones within the composition, enhancing both visual harmony and the graceful aesthetic character of the landscape.



Figure 2. Functions and characteristics of landscape schemas (Source: Illustration by the author)

3.2. Stylistic characteristics

The architectural landscape schemas in Suzhou drama printed illustrations exhibit distinctive stylistic features that set them apart from the Huizhou school, which primarily employed fine-line outline drawing (*baimiao*), and the Jinling school, which emphasized stark black-and-white contrast. On the one hand, Suzhou engravers infused their personal emotional sensibilities and their understanding of garden aesthetics into their work, gradually shifting the representational emphasis from individual figures to the relational dynamics between figures and their environments, as well as to the internal spatial organization of the landscape itself. This approach placed greater importance on the overall unity of the pictorial composition. At the same time, it

incorporated compositional principles derived from traditional painting and spatial planning concepts rooted in garden design, thereby reflecting the literati's deeper philosophical engagement with the underlying principles of nature beyond mere outward appearance [6]. On the other hand, Suzhou engravers synthesized and refined the visual strengths of both the Jinling and Huizhou woodblock traditions. Their engraved lines are delicate and fluid, while the distribution of black and white areas is handled with careful balance and nuance, resulting in architectural landscape imagery that appears intricate without becoming visually cumbersome.

3.2.1. *Infusing emotion into landscape: the integration of garden art*

Suzhou drama printed illustrations prominently feature garden scenery, reflecting local traditions of garden construction and appreciation. Through the use of scattered-point perspective and multidimensional viewpoints, engravers vividly conveyed the characteristic features of garden design, such as borrowed scenery and the compression of vast natural landscapes into intimate spatial settings. By focusing on moments of heightened dramatic tension within the narrative and drawing upon their own literary sensibilities, illustrators arranged architectural structures, ponds, distant mountains, and vegetation in accordance with the movement and interaction of figures. The rich variety of both organic and inorganic elements enabled these illustrations to transcend the overt theatricality characteristic of earlier Jinling editions, restoring drama—despite its expressive stylization—to a more naturalized and everyday spatial environment. At the same time, the imagery embodied the distinctive cultural atmosphere of the Wu region. For example, in *Newly Compiled Record of Ten Mistaken Lantern Riddles from the Yonghuai Hall*, scenes depicting temple fairs and festive banquets capture the rhythms of everyday life in Suzhou, embedding local social experience within the visual narrative.

Furthermore, the influence of garden art extended beyond the depiction of architectural and landscape elements to the overall compositional structure of printed illustrations. In Suzhou garden design, windows function as important devices for constructing poetic spatial experience, transforming exterior scenery into framed pictorial compositions. As time and viewing position change, the visual content framed by the window acquires new meanings, embodying the Chinese aesthetic emphasis on the interconnectedness of interior and exterior space. *The Craft of Gardens* also documents specialized window forms such as the "moon window", whose circular shape harmonizes symbolically with the form of the moon itself. Accordingly, both the naming conventions and structural design of printed illustration frames reveal close conceptual and formal connections with Suzhou garden window design. Suzhou illustrations characteristically prioritize landscape as the dominant visual subject. The printed frame itself functions metaphorically as an architectural structure, while the illustration within becomes a landscape scene. This compositional strategy invites viewers to engage with the image as if appreciating a garden, thereby enhancing both the literary resonance and the poetic spatial atmosphere of the illustration.

3.2.2. *Refined elegance: the convergence of Jinling and Huizhou artistic traditions*

Architectural landscape schemas constitute a central component of Suzhou drama printed illustrations. Their diverse architectural forms and distinctive regional landscapes provide viewers with a unique aesthetic experience. The formalized treatment of engraved lines and blackened areas did not emerge in isolation but developed through the assimilation of visual and technical strengths from other engraving traditions. In particular, Suzhou engravers absorbed key stylistic and technical features from both the Huizhou and Jinling schools. Located within the Jiangnan region, these areas maintained frequent population movement and artistic exchange. Skilled Huizhou engravers, especially those from the Huang family, migrated to Jinling and Suzhou, bringing with them engraving techniques characterized by densely controlled linework and intricate dot-based texturing. Huizhou illustrations were renowned for their meticulous craftsmanship, with engraved lines as fine as silk threads and minimal reliance on large intaglio areas. Their compositional emphasis lay in detailed narrative depiction, effectively enriching the pictorial surface through additive visual elaboration. Suzhou

drama printed illustrations adopted this meticulous engraving philosophy in their depiction of architectural landscapes. As a result, architectural ornamentation and structural detail became more intricate and refined, while botanical representation expanded in both variety and expressive technique, enhancing the realism and visual richness of illustrated scenes. At the same time, engravers placed greater emphasis on the representation of spatial environments, often reducing the relative scale of figures in order to accommodate more extensive landscape detail and emphasize the integration of human figures within their surroundings. This approach enabled more effective visual articulation of specific narrative moments.

The influence of the Jinling school, by contrast, is most evident in the handling of black-and-white contrast and decorative patterning. Jinling illustrations typically employed larger areas of intaglio engraving, producing strong tonal contrasts. Although architectural backgrounds often included decorative elements, their forms retained traces of theatrical staging conventions. Furthermore, their compositional scale and spatial perspective tended to be more limited, resulting in fewer architectural elements and relatively simple spatial arrangements. In Suzhou drama printed illustrations, however, representational priority shifted toward architectural and landscape elements, often at the expense of figure prominence. While costume ornamentation and decorative patterning remained diverse—drawing upon Huizhou engraving traditions—the increased use of intaglio-rendered landscape forms redistributed visual emphasis toward environmental space. Consequently, figures became more slender and diminutive in proportion, while compositional strategies grew more varied and flexible. Greater attention was devoted to the expressive qualities of landscape and to the reciprocal relationship between image and text, thereby enhancing both the visual and literary dimensions of dramatic illustration.

4. The narrative function of architectural landscape schemas

Beyond serving as visual elements that, together with figures, construct the pictorial system of printed illustrations, architectural landscape schemas also contribute significantly to the optimization of narrative structure. Ming-dynasty Suzhou drama printed illustrations are grounded in the narrative framework of dramatic scripts. Based on their interpretation of the original text, engravers employed different visual schemas to translate narrative events into pictorial form, thereby establishing a visual narrative system. This visual system, in conjunction with the textual narrative, forms an integrated image–text narrative structure that collectively conveys the story within the printed edition. Within this integrated system, architectural landscape schemas function as essential visual elements for representing spatial and temporal dimensions described in the text. They not only faithfully reproduce the narrative content of the original script but also reorganize key moments of action, reassembling them into visual sequences that may operate independently of the linear progression of the textual storyline. In addition, architectural landscape schemas provide spatial frameworks for the placement of accompanying textual elements, such as poetic inscriptions. Their structural form and compositional arrangement may be adjusted in response to these inscriptions, thereby enhancing the lyrical and poetic qualities of the illustration.

4.1. Spatialization of textual narrative

The primary narrative function of architectural landscape schemas within the textual narrative system is to visualize the content of the written drama. On the one hand, engravers drew upon their own interpretive understanding and experiential knowledge to identify pivotal dramatic conflicts within the story and condense them into a series of representative illustrations. Within these visualizations, architectural landscape schemas function as narrative stages that provide coherent spatial settings for character interaction and plot

development, enabling viewers to more easily comprehend and correlate visual scenes with the textual narrative. On the other hand, once narrative events have been translated into visual form, it becomes necessary to organize the composition in accordance with the logical progression of the original text. Through the careful arrangement of architectural and landscape elements, engravers connected spatialized narrative moments into cohesive pictorial sequences. This process effectively reconstructed narrative scenes within a visual framework, transforming temporal storytelling into spatial representation while preserving narrative continuity and enhancing visual intelligibility.

4.1.1. Visualization of plot

From the perspective of the image maker, as Malcolm Barnard has observed, human cognitive habits and behavioral patterns exhibit a fundamental reliance on images; conversely, images reflect the creator's actions, values, and beliefs. As visual products, images and culture are inextricably intertwined [7]. Accordingly, the frequent appearance of architectural and landscape schemas in Suzhou drama printed illustrations represents not only a faithful depiction of observable reality but also a direct engagement with the viewer's cultural framework. Even without reading the accompanying text, viewers are able to infer the temporal and spatial setting of the story, as well as identify key characters, through recognizable visual features. In this way, the image performs a proleptic function, anticipating narrative comprehension. For example, in the Wanli-period edition of *The Northern Romance of the Western Chamber*, the scholar wearing a cap and lacking facial hair represents Zhang Junrui, while the elaborately coiffed and richly dressed female figure signifies Cui Yingying. The presence of Buddhist statues and incense burners within the architectural setting indicates the famous scene in which Cui Yingying and Zhang Sheng secretly exchange vows beneath the moon. By incorporating symbolic props and vegetation within architectural settings, illustrators enhanced the recognizability of narrative scenes, enabling viewers to intuitively grasp key plot developments. Drawing upon their prior experience of theatrical performance or textual reading, viewers could readily comprehend the general trajectory of the narrative and more easily identify differences among various printed editions.

4.1.2. Reconstruction of narrative scenes

Architectural landscape schemas constitute an essential component of visual storytelling, playing a crucial role in spatial construction and serving as primary vehicles for the juxtaposition of multiple narrative scenes. Through the depiction of several events arranged according to a coherent visual logic within a single illustration, engravers constructed an autonomous visual narrative system that could function independently of the textual narrative. Given the diverse range of settings depicted in Suzhou drama printed illustrations—including boudoirs, festival celebrations, and banquet scenes—architectural environments serve as important indicators of narrative time and place. Juxtaposition was especially useful in representing stories unfamiliar to viewers or complex narratives composed of multiple interconnected episodes. In the former case, juxtaposed imagery provided explanatory clarification, enabling viewers to better understand narrative background and immerse themselves in the storyline. In the latter case, illustrations depicting multiple episodes often retained a degree of independence, lacking strict sequential continuity with other images. Due to spatial limitations, engravers frequently condensed multiple temporal moments into a single compositional frame—a visual strategy that became increasingly common in the later development of Suzhou drama printed illustration. In such composite images, viewers rely on variations in architectural form and landscape detail to distinguish and reconstruct temporal and spatial relationships. Architectural landscape schemas facilitate this process by presenting differences in structural form, environmental setting, and seasonal vegetation, thereby signaling the coexistence of multiple narrative moments within a unified pictorial space. More specifically, juxtaposed scenes may be classified into three categories: simultaneous events in different locations, sequential events in

the same location, and events occurring at different times and places. Among Suzhou drama printed illustrations, the first two types appear most frequently.

First, simultaneous events in different locations expand the temporal scope beyond a single instant to encompass multiple events occurring within the same time frame but separated spatially. For example, in the fourth act of the Chongzhen-period edition of *Lotus Pond*, the heroine Lianzhen encounters Li Su during a boating festival and exchanges lotus blossoms and seeds as tokens of affection (Figure 3). In the illustration, a triangular sandbank divides the pictorial space into two distinct zones, separating the scene of gift exchange from the banquet gathering. This diagonal spatial division indicates that both events occur simultaneously but in different locations on the lake, subtly conveying the intimacy and privacy of the protagonists' developing relationship. This compositional technique clarifies narrative hierarchy while emphasizing temporal simultaneity.

Second, sequential events in the same location depict the passage of time within a single spatial setting. This technique often relies on the repeated appearance of the same characters, distinguished by changes in clothing or activity, to signal temporal progression. Another illustration from *Lotus Pond* demonstrates this approach. In one area, architectural decorations such as embroidered ceremonial balls, incense stands, and ornate curtains establish a festive wedding atmosphere. In another, a courtyard scene shows a man lifting a woman in an expression of post-marital affection. The architectural facade serves as a spatial boundary dividing the residence into two temporal phases—before and after marriage (Figure 4). Differences in architectural arrangement and costume design allow viewers to recognize the temporal transition within a unified spatial environment.

Finally, the juxtaposition of events occurring at different times and in different places is most commonly associated with dream sequences. In such cases, decorative dream motifs function as visual boundaries separating dream and reality, clearly distinguishing the two realms. Multiple events unfolding across distinct temporal and spatial dimensions may coexist within a single image, fulfilling narrative functions analogous to flashback, foreshadowing, or interpolated narration in literary storytelling.

In summary, the technique of visual juxtaposition draws upon the fluid temporal structure characteristic of Chinese literary narrative, as well as compositional principles derived from traditional painting. By using architectural and landscape elements as visual markers of temporal progression, illustrators constructed a coherent narrative framework of time and space within Suzhou drama printed editions.

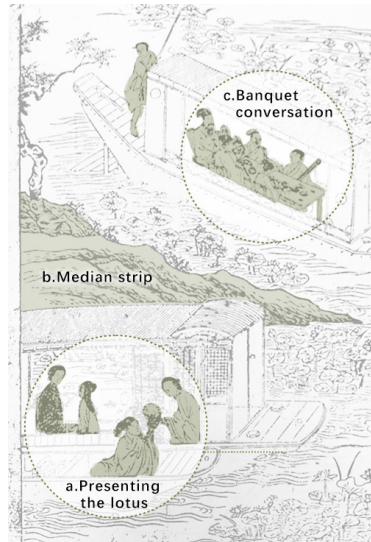


Figure 3. Analytical diagram of Lotus Pond, illustration 1 (Source: Zhou Xinhui, *Collection of Huizhou, Wulin, and Suzhou Woodblock Prints*)

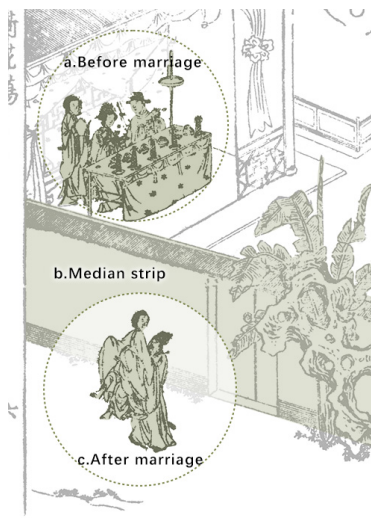


Figure 4. Analytical diagram of Lotus Pond, illustration 2 (Source: Zhou Liang, *Woodblock Illustrations of Ming and Qing Drama*)

4.2. Optimizing the image–text narrative system

In Ming-dynasty Suzhou drama printed illustrations, textual elements played an important role and interacted closely with the visual components within the image. Architectural landscape schemas typically occupy roughly two-thirds of the illustration's space, providing areas for the placement of text and, in some cases, emphasizing the orderly arrangement of textual elements within the overall composition. These textual elements can be broadly categorized into supplementary text and dramatic poetry or lyrics. Supplementary text is often integrated within the structural framework of architectural landscapes, enhancing visual unity and imbuing the image with a poetic quality. Dramatic poetry or lyrics carry deeper connotations, prompting subtle adjustments in architectural form to align with the meaning of the text, thereby conveying the creator's values and emotional tone.

4.2.1. Poetic supplementary text

Visual elements in printed illustrations are not limited to pure imagery; supplementary text often accompanies architectural landscape schemas to enrich both aesthetic appeal and informational function. These texts, typically short, appear as annotations, couplets, comments, praises, or brief poetic lines, and can be classified into explanatory, prompting, and associative categories based on content. Explanatory texts provide publishing information, sales advertisements, or publisher and engraver names. They are usually placed in the corners of landscape units or between architectural features, blending seamlessly into the image while maintaining a functional role. Prompting texts guide viewers through the narrative. Early editions often framed annotations, praises, or couplets in black boxes positioned above landscape schemas to draw attention to key plot points. By the mid-period of Suzhou drama editions, prompting texts were more frequently located in the edition margins, such as in chapter headings or titles, though occasionally they remained embedded within illustrations to maintain compositional harmony or emphasize certain visual features. For instance, in *Long Life Thread*, the areas marked a and c form a yin–yang contrast of dense and sparse elements, with expansive white space in a evoking heavy snowfall, while the text "Broken Bridge and Snow" in b reinforces the scene by referencing snow merging with the background (Figure 5). By the late period of Suzhou printed editions, the narrative function of supplementary text diminished. The emphasis shifted toward creating a poetic resonance between text and image rather than summarizing or directly reflecting plot events. Text now often consisted of lyrical lines from the drama itself or related poetic excerpts. For example, in the thirty-third act of the Chongzhen-period edition of *The Critique of Red Plum in the Jade Tea Hall*, the illustration features the original verse: "The bright moon casts its light through the corridor, Petals of soft red lament the setting sun". While this text contributes little to advancing the plot, combined with the depiction of trees and rocks, it evokes a quiet, introspective atmosphere, reflecting the protagonist's subtle melancholy and guiding the viewer's emotional response.

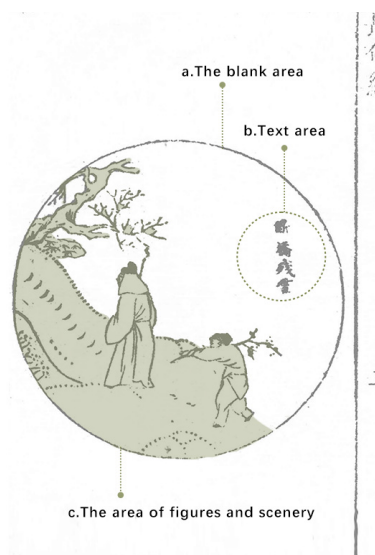


Figure 5. Long Life Thread (Source: Zhou Liang & Gao Fumin, *Ancient Suzhou Woodblock Prints*)

4.2.2. Enhancing narrative poeticism

In Ming-dynasty Suzhou drama printed illustrations, architectural landscape schemas not only faithfully reproduce the content of the original drama text but also actively shape a deeper atmospheric and emotional environment. Unlike early Ming illustrations, which emphasized action, later Suzhou editions prioritize the structure of architecture and the layout of landscapes, using expansive compositions to convey the spatial

environment and the inner world of characters. For instance, in *A Study of the West Chamber* (Figure 6), the illustration divides the scene into foreground, middle ground, and background according to conventional spatial proportions. Traditional painting techniques are applied to depict trees and flowing clouds, creating a sense of continuity and depth. The circular courtyard in area b is designed to guide the viewer's gaze toward the central figures in area a, emphasizing their narrative importance. Meanwhile, details in areas b and c3—including a cooling table, potted plants, bamboo groves, and a pavilion—interact with the inscribed verse in area c2, "Wanting to sleep yet fearing the quiet of the study, leaning on the railing my regrets intensify". Together, these elements evoke a tranquil, cool nocturnal atmosphere and visually reinforce Zhang Sheng's longing and anxious anticipation for Cui Jing's presence. The scene subtly foreshadows Cui Jing's impending appearance, where her actions of lighting incense and being moved by Zhang Sheng's talent and devotion are hinted at through the environment. The illustration's strong sense of depth vividly conveys themes of longing, romance, and subtle emotional tension, producing a refined, understated rhythm. Such muted, suggestive representation not only reveals the dramatic conflicts but also embeds the illustrator's interpretive engagement with the text, creating an evocative layer of poetic ambiance. Consequently, meticulous depictions of landscapes, careful scaling of characters, and harmonization between figures and environment became hallmarks of the late-period Suzhou drama illustrations. While the emphasis on architectural and scenic features occasionally sacrifices direct narrative clarity and remains constrained by the source text, it marks a significant advancement in the literati-oriented aesthetic. The deepened poetic sensibility in these illustrations signifies the maturation of the Suzhou drama printed book as a vehicle for literati artistic expression.

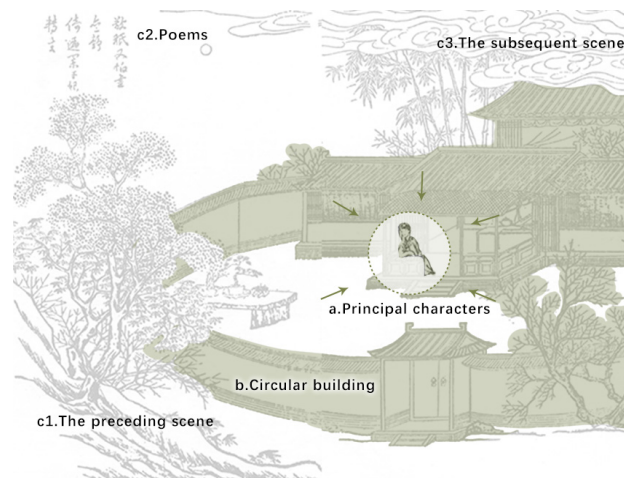


Figure 6. *A Study of the West Chamber* (Source: Zhou Liang & Gao Fumin, *Ancient Suzhou Woodblock Prints*)

5. Conclusion

As Hu Yinglin observed, Suzhou's book-printing was the most exquisite nationwide, with an extensive collection: "There are three main places for engraving: Wu, Yue, and Min. Of these, Wu is the most refined; Min has the most; Yue ranks next. In terms of precision, Wu is foremost; for lightness, Min excels; Yue comes after" [8]. This concentrated refinement is clearly reflected in the architectural landscape schemas, which constitute an indispensable component of Ming-dynasty Suzhou drama printed illustrations. First, from a socio-economic perspective, these illustrations indirectly reflect Suzhou's thriving trade and economic development, alongside the markedly improved material life of local literati. This affluence fostered a distinct

aesthetic of daily life: from the architectural layout of gardens to the selection of plant species, strict aesthetic and functional standards were observed. At the same time, social mobility contributed to the blurring of distinctions between elite and popular taste. Traditional literati landscape painting was adapted to reflect worldly realities, transforming into architectural landscape schemas that appeared in commercially produced books accessible to a broader audience. Second, regarding visual characteristics, architectural landscape schemas not only absorbed the technical and stylistic advantages of the Huizhou and Jinling schools, but also integrated the illustrator's personal interpretation. They encapsulate the elegance of Suzhou-style gardens and classical aesthetic ideals, while being further influenced by the Wu School of painting and Suzhou literary styles. The resulting compositional layouts and artistic intent display a clear preference for elite aesthetic sensibilities. Finally, from a narrative standpoint, architectural landscape schemas play a pivotal role in spatializing plot development and facilitating the interaction between text and image. This corresponds with the traditional Chinese scattered-point literary structure, providing a layered visual narrative that mirrors the Ming dynasty's cultural climate of indulgence, leisure, and inclusive artistic appreciation. In sum, the architectural landscape schemas of Suzhou drama printed books represent a unique convergence of economic prosperity, literati aesthetics, visual innovation, and narrative sophistication, embodying the interplay between social life, art, and literature in late Ming society.

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