

Fengshen yanyi 封神演義 Illustrations: Bridging Religion and Entertainment

Barbara Witt

Research Center for Chinese Cultural Subjectivity in Taiwan, National Chengchi University

Fengshen yanyi 封神演義, variously translated as “Investiture of the Gods”, “Canonization of the Gods” or “Metamorphoses of the Gods” among others, is an important late Ming religious novel, second in popularity only to the famous *Xiyou ji* 西遊記. Together these two novels head the genre of late imperial popular religious novels that Lu Xun 魯迅 named *shenmo xiaoshuo* 神魔小說, “Novels About Gods and Demons”.¹ We know from late Qing dynasty sources that *Fengshen yanyi* was actually used in religious contexts as a prompt book for religious edification² in a capacity that Chinese missionaries saw as challenging the ‘Truth’ of the Bible.³ Liang Qichao 梁啟超 singled it out as one of the works holding back the modernization of the Chinese populace due to its great influence.⁴ Even earlier in the Qing dynasty *xiaoshuo* 小說 have been mentioned as a fourth belief next to the standardized “Three Teachings” (*sanjiao* 三教) of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism⁵ and one scholar even claimed that all of Northern China belief in the events described in the novel.⁶

Despite what this suggests, the novel itself is not a straightforward religious narrative. Rather, it is based on a popular historical narrative cycle (that had developed by the Yuan dynasty at the latest) about the Campaign of King Wu of Zhou against King Zhou of Shang (Wu wang fa Zhou 武王伐紂). This story cycle was supplemented by a large number of characters based on popular and local deities from late Ming religious syncretism. Their investiture into a hierarchical pantheon (the *fengshen* 封神 of the title) based on a network centered around the Eastern Peak (*dongyue* 東嶽)⁷ was summarily predated to the time of the Shang-Zhou transition. Most of the narrative is devoted to supernatural battle scenes that serve to showcase the fighting and magical powers of its protagonists.

¹ 魯迅，《中國小說史略》。

² Simmons, E.Z. “Idols and Spirits”, *The Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal*, 1888.

³ Garritt, J. C. “Popular account of the Canonization of the Gods, Illustrated.”, *The Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal*, 1899.

⁴ 梁啟超，《論小說與群治之關係》；《告小說家》。

⁵ 古有儒釋道三教，自明以來又多一教，曰小說。小說演義之書也，未嘗自以為教也；而士大夫、農工商賈無不習聞之，以至兒童、婦女，不識字者亦皆聞而如見之，是其教較之儒釋道而更廣也。（1728-1804），《潛研堂文集》。

⁶ 南方之人智而巧，少迷信而多政治思想；北方之人直而愚，尚武力而多神權迷信。何以知之？曰：凡山東、山西、河南一帶，無不尊信《封神》之傳；凡江浙閩廣一帶，無不崇拜《水滸》之書。陶成（1878-1912），《教會源流考》。

⁷ Meulenbeld, Mark RE. *Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Networks, and the History of a Ming Novel*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2015.

While the novel's main text functions in a space between popular literature and popular religion,⁸ its various illustrations generally serve to strengthen its tie to religious themes. Illustrations of Ming and Qing dynasty novels are often the focus of edition studies (*banben xue* 版本學). In accordance with Gérard Genette's definition of "paratext"⁹ they work to influence the reader in how to read and understand the main text of the novel. At the same time they are not a stable element that is necessarily present across various editions. An analysis and comparison of several *Fengshen yanyi* illustrations will therefore be illuminating in how the effects these illustrations can have on the reader vary considerably.

The seven volumes discussed below were selected based on their online availability. Edition studies often rely on scholars to procure the financial means to travel to libraries and archives, which is not always possible for early career researchers who have often only limited funds. Thankfully, a number of libraries around the world have started to upload scans of their collections onto online platforms. The editions in this study can all be viewed online for free and in most cases even be downloaded for offline use.

Chapter Illustrations

The only Ming dynasty edition extant today is stored on the Japanese Cabinet Library and accessible in the National Archives of Japan Digital Archive. The 100-chapter illustrations of this edition were later reproduced in the Sixue caotang 四學草堂 editions of Chu Renhuo 褚人獲 (1635-ca. 1705) as evident in the Qinglai-Pavillon (Qinglai ge 清籟閣) edition (Bibliothèque nationale de France) and the Benya 本衙 edition (Harvard Digital Collections) as well as the sketch-like abridged reproduction of the Tianbao-Mansion (tianbao tang 天寶堂) edition (Keio University via Hathi Trust).

Edition	舒載陽：批評全像武王伐紂外史 封神演義
Illustrations	100 chapter illustrations
Platform	National Archives of Japan Digital Archive https://www.digital.archives.go.jp/das/meta/F100000000000107715 。

Edition	四雪草堂訂証 鍾伯敬先生原本 封神演義 清籟閣藏板
Illustrations	100 chapter illustrations, by Ma Liang 馬良, 1694
Platform	Gallica (Bibliothèque nationale de France) 法國國家圖書館 http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9611692 。

Edition	四雪草堂訂証 鍾伯敬先生原本 封神演義 本衙藏板
Illustrations	100 chapter illustrations, by Ma Liang 馬良, 1694
Platform	Harvard Digital Collections 哈佛大學圖書館 http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:27258313

Edition	鍾伯敬先生批評 繡像封神演義 東粵天寶樓藏板
Illustrations	40 chapter illustrations

⁸ Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare*; Shahar, Meir. "Vernacular Fiction and the Transmission of Gods' Cults in Late Imperial China." *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China* (1996): 184-211.

⁹ Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation*. Vol. 0. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Platform	Hathi Trust Digital Library (日本慶應義塾大學) https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100070258 。
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The chapter illustrations are collected at the beginning of the book in the first volume (*juan* 卷) and function as a visual representation of every chapter in sequence. They show the story in detailed and carefully composed full page illustrations. To take the Nezha 哪吒 story in chapters 12 to 14 as an example, they can be useful to present an episode as a cohesive unit while at the same time presenting a progression within its panels. Chapter 12 opens with two fighting opponents arranged on a diagonal line. This constellation is repeated throughout all three panels but becomes a triangle through the addition of a timid observer in the panel for Chapter 13. In Chapter 14 this observer is finally at least as important as the other two characters and even seems to preside over them. At the same time a progression takes place that moves the setting from human settlement into a Daoist mountain scenery that leads into Chapter 15's depiction of Jiang Ziya 姜子牙 on Mount Kunlun 崑崙. While selecting a single theme for each of these four chapters to be represented in the limited space of the illustration page, the unknown illustrator decided to show an increasingly Daoist theme in his panel: from Nezha beating the Dragon Prince through the Daoist Taiyi zhenren 太乙真人 fighting Shiji niangniang 石磯娘娘 and the Daoist Randeng daoren 燃燈道人 calmly controlling Nezha's murderous hunt of his own father, we finally arrive at the image of Jiang Ziya waiting in stillness for his departure down the mountain. Three chapters known for Nezha's spirited and violent fight against dragons, spirits and his father, are thereby imbued with a decidedly Daoist theme.

Interestingly, the Sixue caotang editions painstakingly reproduce the Ming dynasty illustrations. An inscription on the illustration to Chapter 85 tells us that Ma Liang 馬良, who is otherwise unknown, finished this set in 1694, one year before the date in Chu Renhuo's preface, which is the presumed year of publication. It is likely that Chu Renhuo himself commissioned Ma Liang to re-carve the original Ming dynasty illustrations as close as possible, preserving their original form.

The Tianbao-Mansion edition on the other hand not only crudely reproduced the panels, it also removed all the Daoist references from the illustration of the Nezha story, by only including the first scene in Chapter 12.

Illustrations Over Text

Edition	全像商周傳 封神演義 金陵德聚堂梓
Illustrations	Illustrations over text 上圖下文
Platform	Harvard Digital Collections 哈佛大學圖書館 http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:3598951 。

Harvard Digital Collections also holds the Deju-Hall (德聚堂) edition that contains continuous illustrations on the top part of all text pages. As opposed to the chapter illustrations, the illustrations over text format of the Deju-Hall edition don't add thematic focus to the story of Nezha, instead opting to follow most twists and turns of the young hero's adventures in a faithful manner.

Portraits

Another form of illustrations in late imperial novels were character portraits at the beginning of the book.

Such illustrations can be found in the Shancheng-Hall (shancheng tang 善成堂) edition which can be found on Bayerische StaatsBibliothek digital. More interestingly, another volume exists that does not contain the novel *Fengshen yanyi*, but nevertheless showcases 50 character portraits. This *Fengshen zhenxing tu* 封神真形圖 (“The True Forms of Invested Gods”) can be found on the digital rare books collection of the National Central Library.

Edition	鍾伯敬先生評 重鐫繪像封神演義 善成堂藏板
Illustrations	32 portraits
Platform	Bayerische StaatsBibliothek digital 德國巴伐利亞國立圖書館 http://www.mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn/resolver.pl?urn=urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb11129917-7 。

Edition	《封神真形圖》
Illustrations	50 portraits
Platform	國家圖書館古籍與特藏資源 http://rbook2.ncl.edu.tw/Search/SearchDetail?item=13dc183f665e4d7db404093862fd7d9bfDc2ODY30&image=1&page=&whereString=IEBUaXRzZV9NYWluIClIsIHnpZ4iIA2&sourceWhereString=ICYgQHNvdXJjZV9zb3VyY2UgIClIj6TnsY3lVbHlg4_mqqLntKLos4fmlpnlusqi0&SourceID=

The 32 portraits of the Shancheng-Hall edition and the 50 portraits of *Fengshen zhenxing tu* show characters from the novel in a clearly defined order. But this order is not based on these characters' prominence within the text itself, but rather on the syncretistic pantheon the novel established in its penultimate chapter. These sets of portraits both feature the aforementioned Nezha, but despite his frequent appearances in the novel he is only shown after his father Li Jing 李靖 (and his brothers Jinzha 金吒 and Muzha 木吒). They can claim seniority within the pantheon, even though they only appear in some episodes of the novel, unlike Nezha who has a constant prominent place in the vanguard of Jiang Ziya. This is because the pantheon transcends the novel; the illustrations at the beginning of the first volume serve to remind the reader of that.

Portraits in the Shancheng-Hall edition

1 老君	9 廣成子	17 楊任	25 順天王
2 元始天尊	10 伯邑考	18 趙公明	26 哼將軍
3 通天教主	11 比干	19 武成王	27 哈將軍
4 接引	12 楊戩	20 獨角龍鬚虎	28 方相、方弼
5 周文王	13 雷震子	21 韋佗	29 土行孫
6 周武王	14 李天王	22 風天王	30 殷郊
7 紂王	15 哪吒	23 調天王	31 蘇妲己
8 姜尚	16 聞仲	24 雨天王	32 申公豹

The *Fengshen zhenxing tu* has even stronger reference to the religious hierarchy by including the full titles the depicted deities receive in Chapter 99. Further, its title is reminiscent of Daoist True Form Charts

(*zhenxing tu* 真形圖),¹⁰ used for example in the ritual writings of amulets (*fu* 符). The character portraits therefore function to strengthen the bond between *Fengshen yanyi* and popular religion even more than the chapter illustrations.

Portraits in the *Fengshen zhenxing tu*

1 太上老君	14 周武王姬發	27 善才童子哪吒	40 增長天王魔理青
2 元始天尊	15 太公姜尚	28 護法神韋護	41 廣目天王魔理紅
3 通天教主	16 九天應元雷神普化天尊聞仲	29 雷震子	42 多文天王魔理海
4 南極仙	17 文曲星殷比干	30 二郎神楊戩	43 持國天王魔理壽
5 接引菩薩	18 中天北極紫薇大帝伯邑考	31 土府星土行孫	44 七殺星張奎
6 陸壓道人	19 東嶽天齊仁聖大帝黃飛虎	32 顯道神方弼	45 桃花星高蘭英
7 燃燈道人	20 貌端星賈氏王妃	33 闡路神方相	46 金龍如意正一龍虎玄壇真君照公明
8 赤精子	21 三山正神炳靈公黃天化	34 獨角龍鬚虎	47 青龍星鄧九公
9 雲中子	22 值年太歲殷郊	35 黃幡星魏賁	48 哼將軍鄭倫
10 廣成子	23 五谷星殷洪	36 甲子太歲楊任	49 哈將軍陳奇
11 天喜星紂天子殷受	24 金塔天王李靖	37 孤辰星余化	50 分水將軍申公豹
12 九尾狐妲己	25 金吒	38 火德星君羅宣	
13 周文王姬昌	26 木吒	39 龍德星洪錦	

¹⁰ Huang, Shih-shan Susan. *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China*. Harvard University Asia Center, 2012.