

François Louis

Design by the book: Chinese ritual objects and the Sanli tu. New York, Bard Graduate Center, 2017; distributed by University of Chicago Press, 2017. \$30. ISBN: 978-1-941-79210-0.

Published to accompany an exhibition at Bard Graduate Center Gallery, *Design by the book* charts the far-reaching impact of Nie Chongyi's (fl. 948-964) *Illustrations to the ritual classics (Sanli tu)* on Chinese material culture. In doing so, this elegant and meticulously annotated study sheds new light on the development of the illustrated book, tracing the dynamic interplay between the format of the printed catalogue, paintings of artifacts, and the manufacture of ritual implements from the Later Zhou (951-960) to the twentieth century. Beyond contributing to a recent wave of publications exploring the histories of antiquarianism in imperial China, François Louis's own lavishly illustrated compendium provides a wealth of material with which to reflect on the competing roles of images, words, and things in the study of the past.

As Louis notes at the outset, Nie Chongyi's catalogue has long occupied a comparatively marginal position in scholarship on Chinese antiquities. Surviving in a version completed in 961, Nie's *Sanli tu* is the earliest extant example of a tradition of illustrated commentary on the three ritual classics—the *Liji* (The Book of rites), *Yili* (Etiquette and ceremonial), and *Zhouli* (The rites of Zhou)—that dates back to the late Han era (206 BCE-220 CE). The catalogue consists of 362 entries describing the implements, spaces, and attire mentioned in transmitted ritual texts, offering a picture and a short commentary consisting of classical citations for each object. Louis stresses that for the first millennium CE, discussions of ritual paraphernalia were based exclusively on classical texts and the kinds of annotated illustrations found in Nie's book, rather than excavated artifacts. And yet, despite offering unparalleled insights into medieval practices of visual exegesis, Nie's *Sanli tu* has been widely dismissed in modern scholarship as a 'quaint predecessor' to later Song dynasty epigraphic research on 'metal and stone' (*jinshi xue*). Louis frames his study in revisionist terms, yet it remains unclear whether his real aim is still to insist on the singularity of Nie's text, redeeming its unique approach to the representation of ritual objects, or whether he hopes to recast the *Sanli tu* as a hitherto overlooked influence on the broader study of antiquities in later periods. Oscillating between these two perspectives, Louis nevertheless offers a highly nuanced account of the reception of Nie's project, recovering what was rejected from the eleventh century onwards, while pursuing unsuspected vectors of dissemination.

Louis's book is divided into two parts: a historical study of Nie Chongyi's catalogue in six chapters, followed by a series of three lengthy appendices detailing the editions of the *Sanli tu*, a comprehensive illustrated glossary, and a survey of the various artifacts displayed in the Bard exhibition. Textual scholars will be particularly drawn to Louis's careful reconstruction of the catalogue's publication history in the first appendix. His overview of the extant copies of Nie's book is preceded by a list of the six now lost editions of earlier *Sanli tu*, ranging from a Six Dynasties manuscript in 9 scrolls combining illustrations by Zheng Xuan (127-200) and Ruan Chen (b. ca. 170), to a Sui court manuscript edition of the Kaihuang era (581-601) in 12 scrolls. Nie's original manuscript of 961, in 20 scrolls, is now lost, as is an early printed edition from Sichuan that served as a model for all known later imprints. In addition to the first punctuated reprint in 2006 and a digitized text from 2009, there are five extant editions of Nie's *Sanli tu*. As Louis's copious notes demonstrate, these different versions have their own intriguing histories: the 1175 *Xinding Sanli tu*—the principal source for the *Siku Quanshu* edition and most modern reprints—for instance, passed through the hands of such illustrious bibliophiles as Qian Qianyi (1582-1664), Xu Qianxue (1631-1694), and the Deputy Mayor of Tianjin, Zhou Shutao (1891-1984), one of Republican China's leading collectors. The wealth of detail in these appendices is another testament to the rigor of the study as a whole.

Louis presents his own history of the *Sanli tu* as a 'cultural biography', adopting Igor Kopytoff's influential approach to studying the life-cycle of an object as it passes in and out of the market. In using such language, the author invites his reader to view the *Sanli tu* as a thing-in-motion, an entity that assumes unlikely guises at different phases in its existence. His narrative is interspersed with miniature cultural biographies of ritual artifacts from the catalogue—from millet and finger rulers to a bell stand—encouraging the reader to find their own sets of correspondences between Nie's entries. While the benefit of this approach is that it allows for a compelling overview of the catalogue's multifaceted social life, certain important issues such as the relationship between Nie's images and other understandings of *tu* in late medieval China, or the discrepancies between the *Sanli tu* and later Song catalogues of antiques, receive little sustained analysis. In places it again becomes hard to differentiate between what makes Nie's particular work unique and what about it ended up becoming generic.

Chapters One and Two situate the production of Nie Chongyi's *Sanli tu* against the backdrop of state-sponsored Confucian regeneration, initially at the court of the Later Zhou and then under the early Song rulers. Following the construction of the state altars in Kaifeng in 953, Zhou Shizong (921-959) ordered a revision of sacrificial vessels and jades, a commission that eventually

led Nie Chongyi—a leading ritual expert—to review and correct extant illustrations to the Classics. While other scholars have already underscored the critical role of the emperor as an intended viewer of the final catalogue, Louis highlights Nie’s artful interventions, suggesting, to take one of several examples, that his decision to open the section on archery rituals with the non-martial pitch-pot game was an implicit argument for the cultivating role of civil officials.¹

In the second chapter, Louis also addresses the transition from the original format of the scroll—still a norm for book projects in the mid-tenth century—to the earliest surviving printed editions of the *Sanli tu* from the Southern Song era (1127-1279). Even as he identifies instances of ‘simplification’, as when carvers reduced the number of strings and beads in the woodblock illustrations of ceremonial caps, Louis posits a close relationship between Nie’s now lost original manuscript and the ‘painterly elegance’ of the line drawings in early imprints. This link is apparent, he claims, in the way certain illustrations fit awkwardly within the rectangular frame of the print block, often cutting across the central crease of the folio. Such details suggest that these images of ritual paraphernalia were not specifically designed for the format of the imprint but were instead derived from the original scroll. Louis’s purpose in these opening chapters is to chart Nie’s editorial compilation of the *Sanli tu*, yet his analysis sheds light on broader negotiations between different publishing technologies in the media ecology of the Song.

Chapters Three and Four examine the relationship of Nie Chongyi’s catalogue to material and visual culture. Louis first surveys several recent archaeological finds to demonstrate the influence of the *Sanli tu* designs on the specifications of ritual objects owned by the imperial family and dynastic elite. Building upon his own previously published research, he also insightfully shows how nonorthodox sources from the Tang—whether a lobed jade disc or the animal protome of a rhyton from Sogdiana—may have conditioned Nie’s visual reconstructions of classical antiquities.² Aside from circulating in book format, Emperors Song Taizu (r. 960-976) and Taizong (r. 976-997) installed Nie’s designs as painted murals in the compound of the Directorate of Education in Kaifeng. This mode of display served as a form of dynastic propaganda and paintings based on designs from the *Sanli tu* were subsequently transmitted to provincial classrooms throughout the empire. In another example of deft

1 See, for instance, Jeffrey Moser, “Recasting Antiquity: Ancient Bronzes and Ritual Hermeneutics in the Song Dynasty,” PhD Diss., Harvard University, 2010.

2 François Louis, “The Hejiacun Rhyton and the Chinese wine horn: intoxicating rarities and their antiquarian history,” *Artibus Asiae* 67 (2007): 301-42.

comparative analysis, Louis follows a passing reference in a tenth century anecdote to uncover the possible similarities between *Sanli tu* murals and images of archaic artifacts in surviving painted handscrolls of the *Rhapsody of the Luo River Nymph*. In these two chapters, Louis eloquently captures the mutual exchange between Nie Chongyi's catalogue and contemporaneous objects and paintings: on the one hand, Nie's designs regulated the production of artifacts and became models for copyists of narrative scrolls; on the other hand, his designs were unwittingly shaped by the cosmopolitan material legacy of the Tang and took on parallel lives as painted murals in Song local academies.

Chapters Five and Six examine the legacy of Nie Chongyi's *Sanli tu*, first amid the rise of antiquarianism (*jinsi xue*) from the 1050s onwards and then in the wake of Emperor Song Huizong's (1082-1094) ritual reforms. Both of these developments did much to undermine the authority of Nie's designs. As a younger generation of collectors—Mei Yaochen (1002-1060), Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072), and Liu Chang (1019-1068)—started to conduct research based on excavated bronze vessels, they identified inconsistencies in Nie's catalogue. A major shift occurred in the 1090s when Lü Dalin (1040-1092) compiled the first synthesis of antiquarian scholarship, the *Illustrated investigations of antiquity* (*Kaogu tu*)—a work that advocates for the study of surviving artifacts as a means of returning to the way of the ancient sages. This shift coincides, in Louis's account, with discourses surrounding the representation of ritual vessels becoming increasingly imbricated in factional politics. With Huizong's reforms of sacrificial objects and the compilation of the *Illustrated antiquities of Xuanhe Hall* (*Xuanhe bogu tu*)—a catalogue of Huizong's imperial collections—the rejection of the *Sanli tu* was complete. Prominent commentators and adherents of True Way Learning castigated Nie for never having seen actual bronzes. Louis nevertheless returns to the archaeological record to show how up until the fourteenth century, vessels were still being produced on the basis of *Sanli tu* designs. Even as it was dismissed in mainstream scholarly circles, Nie's work continued to inspire local attempts to 'classicize' funerary practice.

Louis concludes his cultural biography with a series of reflections on the status of Nie Chongyi's images. He suggests that ultimately the naturalistic style of the illustrated designs was 'not about visibility but tangibility', offering viewers an opportunity to apprehend actual ritual objects. In making this claim, he unexpectedly conflates the visual hermeneutic of Nie's *Sanli tu* with antiquarian catalogues like the *Kaogu tu* and *Xuanhe bogu tu*, works he had hitherto strived to differentiate. This somewhat reticent conclusion poses more questions than it answers: do Nie's illustrations really operate in the same way as those in Lü Dalin's catalogue? Does 'tangibility' or the intimation of 'physical presence' matter in other genres of illustration from this period? At stake, here,

is the specific character of an image of a ritual object: in what ways does its referential function and political prestige set it apart from other modes of book illustration? In this sense, Louis's open-ended narrative serves as a stimulus and provocation for future research.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this book is its innovative design. In a fitting tribute to the interplay between text, image, and object in Nie Chongyi's compendium, the format of Louis's study creatively straddles the categories of exhibition catalogue, art historical monograph, and philological commentary. As in the compact Bard Gallery show, *Design by the book* weaves together the stories behind prints, artifacts, and paintings, presenting imaginative juxtapositions, while respecting the different ways in which these diverse media shape our relationship to the material world.

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