

## Three Rams and Three Friends: The Working Lives of Chinese Auspicious Motifs

The elite arts of traditional China, both verbal and visual, exhibit an impressive economy of expression. Poets, calligraphers, and painters draw from a stock of received textual and visual elements: images, phrases, metaphors, and topoi; script-types, stroke-types, motifs, and form-types. They use these over and over again, through verbal and visual quotation or allusion, which are inflected by significant variation and transformed through recombination and through particularities of execution that vary among different executants and that change across formal, political, and personal situations. Over time and through heavy use, these items accumulate stores of associations and become conventions that enable authors to embody economically new responses by selectively manipulating older images and forms. We associate this process and its products particularly with the arts of the Chinese scholars, who developed and deployed effective systemic conventions that served as agents of individual expression among members of their own group – an initiate audience composed of the educated elite.<sup>1</sup>

But are we prepared to see this process of recombination and transformation of traditional elements at work in the impersonal expressions of

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<sup>1</sup> On the role of conventions in the formation and transformation of traditions, see, e. g., Maggie Bickford, *Ink Plum: The Making of a Chinese Scholar-Painting Genre* (New York: Cambridge U.P., 1996), and Maggie Bickford and Charles Hartman, “The Purloined Plum and the Heart of Iron: A Contribution to the History of Flowering Plum Imagery in the Sung and Yüan Dynasties,” *Journal of Sung-Yuan Studies* 26 (1996), pp. 1–54.

collective aspirations in vulgar visual culture? The mass-produced paintings of phoenixes, dragons, peonies, and goldfish that seem to hang in every Chinese restaurant, double-happiness paper cuts pasted on the walls of wedding-banquet halls, long-life medallions that decorate carpets, lockets, and cocktail napkins, bats at the bottom of soup bowls, plastic plum blossoms, the color red. Grandiose or humble, the myriad images that appear to us unbidden in the hotels and tourist stands, grocery stores and taxi cabs of modern East Asia find their match, and frequently their particular prototypes, in the Chinese art collections of museums, in the Qing-dynasty decorations of the Forbidden City, in the robes and personal ornaments excavated from Ming imperial tombs and from elite Yuan and Song burials. They are in the prodigious pictorial output of the painters who worked for the rulers of China from the Song dynasty to the present day, and, more discreetly perhaps, in the art of the scholar-amateurs.

These multitudinous images are in fact survivors, emulations, and adaptations of something far bigger – the overwhelming presence of auspicious graphic devices in the visual daily life of traditional China. Behind auspicious imagery stand traditions that extend with remarkable continuity back to Han and Warring-States materials that bear explicitly auspicious inscriptions, and, doubtless, further to the material record of ancient China, which requires more speculative interpretation. Auspicious images constitute the longest and most comprehensive visual tradition in the history of Chinese art and culture.

In the traditional Chinese literature on art and aesthetics there is no general category for auspicious devices, or visual manifestations of desired outcomes. Perhaps any such rubric would cover so many images and objects, traversing such a long period of time, that it was considered to be useless as an analytic device. Or perhaps such a category would have transgressed the entrenched class distinctions that were maintained by the traditional scholars who organized Chinese culture for themselves and for us as well.

Notices of individual images, ornaments, and patterns that attract good fortune or repel harm are scattered throughout traditional sources, especially those that recount the details of daily life and festival observances in the countryside, cities, and court, for instance those in *Jing Chu suishi ji* 荆楚歲時記, *Dijing suishi jisheng* 帝京歲時紀勝,<sup>2</sup> and *Dongjing menghua lu* 東京夢華錄 (by Meng Yuanlao 孟元老; fl. 1110–1160). During the late Qing and early Republic, they occur also in the amateur and systematic Chinese

ethnographic and folkloric literature and in missionary studies of popular religion, such as J. J. M. de Groot's *Les fêtes annuellement célébrées à Emoui: Étude concernant la religion populaire des Chinois* (published in 1886). In such sources, however, graphic motifs typically are submerged in broader discussions centered on oral tradition and performance. In the last century or more, handbooks on Chinese art, society, and symbols have included lucky images, along with numerology, *fengshui* and *yinyang*, among the various keys to unlocking the mysterious eastern mind. Meanwhile, the great sinologists turned, from time to time, to deciphering particular images or ornaments (some of them auspicious).<sup>3</sup>

It was only in 1928 that Nozaki Nobuchika 野崎誠近, a trader in Tientsin, coined the term “*kisshōzu*” (Chin.: *jixiang tu* 吉祥圖) to characterize collectively some of the most popular motifs he saw about him in pictures and on ornamented objects of daily use. His *Kisshō zuan kaidai* 吉祥圖案解題 (*Explication of Auspicious Designs*) is the first comprehensive and systematic study of such material.<sup>4</sup> It is the foundation or key reference for most modern studies of Chinese auspicious motifs.<sup>5</sup>

Nozaki approached his task like a cryptographer. He decoded the visual puns (or rebuses) and identified the legendary figures and their attributes that constitute a large fraction of the auspicious visual repertory. Over the course of 185 entries and additional notes, he set out series of illustrated transpositions: popular rebuses like bats = blessings (*fu* 蝠/*fu* 福), and symbolic equations like peaches = longevity and mandarin ducks = marital bliss. Although his book stands as the indispensable field guide to Chinese auspicious images, it remains ahistorical and static.

The more recent literature devoted to auspicious images or informatively touching upon the subject is wide in scope. Scholars of early China treat auspicious images as a matter of course. Later Chinese metalwork,

<sup>3</sup> Édouard Chavannes focused on visibility in *De l'expression des vœux dans l'art populaire Chinois* (Paris: Editions Bossard, 1922 [originally published in *Journal asiatique*, 1901]). Taking a group of objects in the Musée Guimet and private collections as a point of departure, he decoded the auspicious import of a dozen popular motifs and exposed various means of encoding good wishes in graphic images.

<sup>4</sup> Nozaki Nobuchika 野崎誠近, *Kisshō zuan kaidai Shina fuzoku no ichi kenkyū* 吉祥圖案解題 支那風俗の一研究 (Tianjin: Zhongguo tuchan gongsi, 1928). See especially Nozaki's preface and introductory remarks. The traditional term *xiangrui* 祥瑞 refers to omens of favorable response, which are only one subset of the images under discussion.

<sup>5</sup> Nozaki's book has been translated and adapted in many Chinese editions, e. g., *Zhongguo jixiang tu'an Zhongguo fengsu yanjiu zhi yi* 中國吉祥圖案中國風俗研究之一 (Taipei: Zhongwen tushu, 1980), which is an adaptation of the second edition (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1940), with additions and deletions.

<sup>2</sup> See nn. 13, 22, respectively, for full citations of these two works.

ceramics, and textiles – especially the products of the late-Ming and Qing dynasties – extensively employ auspicious ornaments, and this is reflected by research in these fields. Studies of popular visual culture, particularly the literature on *nianhua* 年畫 wood-block prints, offer not only repositories of images but sometimes also provide substantial developmental accounts in social, political and economic contexts.<sup>6</sup>

Since mid-century, several developments have stimulated new research and a widening, ambitious scope of investigations. Archeological excavations have yielded an abundance of datable auspicious images in material contexts that sometimes are elaborately articulated and that sometimes document the occupant's identity. Historians of painting have been extending the range of art-historical investigation beyond the literati canon of subject matter into areas of court and professional painting in which auspicious imagery plays an important and overt role. And they have gone beyond simple symbolic equations to try to understand the social and political uses of such images. Finally, and most provocatively, interest in material culture and cultural studies has stimulated work that purposefully traverses barriers between classes, media, elite and popular culture, and between the so-called "fine" and "decorative" arts.<sup>7</sup> A consequence of these develop-

<sup>6</sup> The relevant literature is too extensive to be cited here *in toto*. The following are especially useful: Schuyler Cammann, "Ming Festival Symbols," *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America* 7 (1953), pp. 66–70; Miyazaki Noriko 宮崎法子, "Chūgoku kachoga no imi" 中國花鳥畫の意味, 2 parts, *Bijutsu kenkyū* 美術研究 363 (January 1995), pp. 265–81, and 364 (March 1995), pp. 324–46; Tokyo National Museum, *Kitshō, Chūgoku bijutsu ni komerareta imi* 吉祥中國美術にこめられた意味 (Tokyo: Tokyo National Museum, 1998); Wang Shucun 王樹村, *Zhongguo jixiang tu jicheng* 中國吉祥圖集成 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin, 1992); Bo Songnian, *Chinese New Year Pictures* (Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1995); Therese Tse Bartholomew, *The Hundred Flowers: Botanical Motifs in Chinese Art* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1985); idem, *Myths and Rebus in Chinese Art* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1988); Wu Hung, "A Sanpan Shan Chariot Ornament and the Xiangrui Design in Western Han Art," *Archives of Asian Art* 37 (1984), pp. 38–59; S. J. Vainker, "Silk of the Northern Song: Reconstructing the Evidence," in Jill Tilden, ed., *Silk and Stone: The Third Half Annual* (London: Hall, 1996), pp. 160–75, 196–97; Qianshen Bai, "Image as Word: A Study of Rebus Play in Song Painting (960–1279)," in *Metropolitan Museum of Art Journal* 34 (1999), pp. 57–72; Wan Yi, Wang Shuqing, Lu Yanzhen, comps. (Rosemary Scott and Erica Shipley, trans.), *Daily Life in the Forbidden City: The Qing Dynasty, 1644–1912* (orig. pub. as *Qingdai gongting shenghuo* 清代宮庭生活; Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1985; Harmondsworth and N.Y.: Viking, 1988). In addition are the following articles, all published in *Zijin cheng* 紫禁城 (Forbidden City): Jiang Shunyuan 姜舜源, "Sanyang kai Tai yu Jiuyang xiaohan" 三羊開泰與九羊消寒 in 62 (1991.1), p. 8; Dong Jianli 董健麗, "Yang, ji yang, yang bu" 羊吉羊羊卜 in 62 (1991.1), pp. 16–17; Fu Lianzhong 傅連仲, "Jiujiu xiaohan tu" 九九消寒圖 in 15 (1982.5), pp. 31–32; He Ling 鶴齡, "Xun Qing huangshi de Xiaohan shitu" 遜清皇室的消寒詩圖 in 58 (1990.3), pp. 46–47; Li Songling 李松齡, "Puyi yu Jiujiu xiaohan tu" 溥儀與九九消寒圖 in 40 (1987.3), pp. 18–20.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Peter C. Sturman, "Cranes Above Kaifeng: The Auspicious Image at the Court of Huizong," in *Ars Orientalis* 20 (1990), pp. 33–68; Maggie Bickford, "Textiles as

elements is an improved scholarly context in which to begin to exploit the untapped resources of the auspicious images that constituted a very large part of traditional Chinese visual life, ultimately providing another key to our understanding of the history of Chinese art and culture.

This, then, is the context in which I have undertaken the present study. I begin by decoding the visual content of an imperial Qing pictorial textile. Subsequently I propose general protocols for the organization of auspicious images, as well as developmental principles, and finally suggest a functional range among different social groups. The motifs are shown to be hard-working: combining and interlocking with one another to deliver multiple auspicious messages. The images that they form are seen as omnivorous in their appetite for accumulating lucky devices. In their drive toward maximized auspicious effect, they exhibit indifference to distinctions among the disparate traditions from which they draw their stock of motifs. Over time and contemporaneously, they cross and cross again between elite and vulgar domains. Their deployment is fluid, and the audience comprehensive. The images elicit a varied reception, ranging from informed introspection to uneducated acceptance as customary, appropriate, and decorative pictures. Some show a peculiar interest in pictorial reality.

## THE EMPEROR'S TAPESTRY

During the last month of the forty-sixth year of his reign (January/February, 1782), the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–1796) wrote a rhymed inscription for a lavish, monumental *kesi* 緙絲 tapestry (figure 1) and had it mounted along its top.<sup>8</sup>

Texts: Emending the Song Literary Record with the Material Evidence of Huang Sheng's Tomb," in *Chinese Textiles*, Percival David Foundation Colloquies on Art and Archaeology 19 (forthcoming); Richard M. Barnhart, *Painters of the Great Ming: The Imperial Court and the Zhe School* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1993); Miyazaki, "Chūgoku kachoga"; Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visibility in Early Modern China* (orig. pub. in Great Britain by Reaktion Books; Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1997); and James Cahill, "Pictures for Use and Pleasure," book in progress. Miyazaki's study makes compelling connections among media and explores relationships of functionality among social groups. Clunas' work is the most ideologically committed and the most challenging to conventional assumptions; see especially his chapter 4, "Practices of Vision."

<sup>8</sup> Palace Museum, Beijing; *kesi* tapestry with added embroidery; 213 x 119 cm; recorded under the entry "Fang Song kesi 'Jiuyang xiaohan tu,' yi zhou" 做宋緙絲九陽消寒圖一軸 ("Imitation of Song *kesi* 'Nine-yang-disperse-the-cold Picture,' one hanging") in Hu Jing 胡敬 et al., comps., *Shiqu baoji sanbian* 石渠寶笈三編 (1816; facs. rpt. Taipei: National Palace Museum [referred to below as NPM], 1971) 7, p. 3485b. For a large color reproduction, see Zhu Jiajin, *Treasures of the Forbidden City*, consulting ed. Graham Hutt (orig. pub. as *Guobao* 國

- 九羊意寓九陽呼 The meaning of the nine yang 羊 resides in the nine yang 陽;
- 因有消寒數九圖 And so we have [before us this] “Dispersing-the-Cold-by-Counting-the-Nines Image.”
- 子半回春心可見 Halfway through the eleventh month, in our mind we could see the returning of spring;
- 男三開泰義猶符 The meaning of “Males [numbering] three initiate the Tai” is even more fitting.
- 宋時勅作真稱巧 [The exemplar] first created in Song times, we justly can call masterful;
- 蘇匠傲為了弗殊 [This] imitation by Su[zhou] craftsmen is without deviation.
- 謾說今人不如古 It is wrong to say that the moderns are not as good as the ancients.
- 以云返朴鄙慚吾 And therefore I say [this] return to simplicity humbles me.

In the second half of the inscription, the emperor proudly states that his tapestry is a superb, contemporary Suzhou copy, after a Song-period original. Perhaps his weavers copied it from an earlier pictorial textile (figure 2) that also was in Qianlong's collection, and that now is in the collections of the National Palace Museum, Taipei.<sup>9</sup>

In the first half he interprets the image, with explications that hinge on

寶, 1983; Harmondsworth: Viking, 1986), no. 98. For a color illustration that includes the emperor's inscription, see Huang Nengfu 黃能馥, ed., *Yinran zhi xiu* 印染織繡, vols. 6–7 of *Zhongguo meishu quanji* 中國美術全集, *Gongyi meishu bian* 工藝美術編 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1985, 1987), vol. 7, no. 183. (A complete list of illustrations and acknowledgments is appended to the present article.)

<sup>9</sup> “Kai Tai tu” 開泰圖, NPM; hanging scroll, silk tapestry with silk embroidery; 217.1 x 64.1 cm; recorded in Wang Jieh 王杰 et al., comps., *Shiqu baiji xubian* 石渠寶笈續編 (1793; facs. rpt. Taipei: NPM, 1971; hereafter *SQB*) 3, p. 1707A (the entry records the object as a *kesi* tapestry with added embroidery). See James Watt and Anne Wardwell, *When Silk Was Gold* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art [referred to below as MMA], 1997), cat. no. 59 for reproduction (fig. 81) and discussion (p. 194).

The MMA's “Welcoming Spring” (embroidered gauze; 213.3 x 63.5 cm; see fig. 3), a pictorial textile depicting boys, sheep, and goats, dated to the Yuan or Ming, once may have been contiguous with the NPM panel (MMA exhibition label, Spring 2000). The composition of the NPM textile is the same, in central particulars, as that of the Qianlong emperor's *kesi* tapestry, but it is narrower – about half the width, suggesting that either the NPM textile was trimmed, or that its composition was expanded by Qing weavers to produce a wall-hanging corresponding in size to the emperor's desired dimensions. (Of course, another earlier pictorial textile might have served as the model for the Qing work.)

rebus that visually pun on a pair of yang homophones. He begins by telling us that the “nine yang 羊” stand for “nine yang 陽.” That is, nine sheep and goats (the yang 羊 that we can see) stand for nine male (yang 陽) units of something that we cannot see.<sup>10</sup> The emperor then explains that this 羊/陽 correspondence is responsible for the configuration of the pictorial textile before him – a “Dispersing-the-Cold-by-Counting-the-Nines Image 消寒數九圖.”

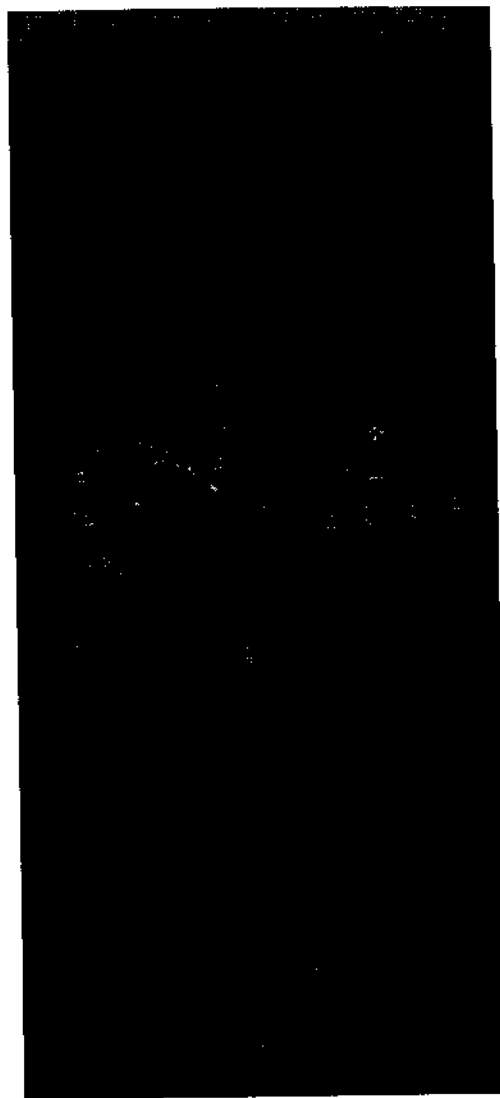
What in fact is he talking about?

#### Counting the Nines

The “nines” to which the Qianlong emperor refers are the nine nine-day periods that follow the winter solstice. The first “nine” begins at the solstice (December 22, by the Western calendar); the nine-

#### Figure 1. Jiuyang xiaohan tu

Anon. artist (18th c.); pictorial textile; colophon by Qianlong emperor dated 1781–82.



<sup>10</sup> Yang 羊 denotes any member of a group of animals that in English can be distinguished from others by words such as “sheep,” “goat,” “ram,” “ewe,” “lamb.” There are other Chinese names and modifiers that are more specific, but most of the texts examined here employ yang. In cases where the visual evidence is clear, I use the appropriate English word in my translations and descriptions. Often it is not clear (and evidently meant to be broadly generic because the image is representing yang) or the group is the subject of discussion; in those cases, I use the word “ram.”

nines 九九 are completed eighty days later, entering the bitterest cold, traversing New Year, and getting into warmer weather.<sup>11</sup> “Jiujiu xiaohan tu 九九消寒圖” (Nine-nines-disperse-the-cold diagrams, charts, and pictures) are visual aids for counting off the nines.

Counting the nines in verse, song, pictures and charts has a long history before the Qianlong emperor’s time and after it, well into the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> The custom of counting the nines seems to have its origins in the farmer’s calendar and its oral traditions. From the Song period on, the textual and visual record shows a curious interplay among rural and urban popular traditions, literati culture, and imperial practice. These relationships are typical of the development and deployment of auspicious images and related oral traditions and performances.

The thirteenth-century almanac *Suishi guangji* 歲時廣記 records, in its chapter devoted to the winter solstice, the vulgar custom of counting the nines from the day following the solstice. The compiler observes that in the streets there is much making of nine-nine lyrics, but he scruples to transcribe them. “Nowadays they circulate ... in printed editions, but the language being coarse and crude, [we] do not record them [here].” Instead, he quotes the closing couplet of a poem on the winter solstice by the literatus Su Che 蘇轍 (1039–1112): “It seems that with change-purse heavy and charcoal cheap / This year’s nines will not be hard to count.”<sup>13</sup>

The Southern Song compiler of *Baoyin jitan* 豹隱紀談, in contrast, willingly records vulgar solstice maxims and rhymes, which he associates

<sup>11</sup> In traditional sources, some counting begins on the day after winter solstice. In the *xinchou* 辛丑 year, when the emperor wrote his inscription, the count would have started on the 8th or 9th of the 11th lun. mo. and finished on the 29th or 30th of the 1st.

<sup>12</sup> The history of the nines and the significance of the number nine and its multiples, especial nine-nines, is too complex to be recounted here. I treat these matters in detail in “Counting the Nines in Traditional China,” in progress.

<sup>13</sup> “Jin jiu shu” 盡九數 (“Exhausting the Nines Count”), Chen Yuanjing 陳元靚, comp., *Suishi guangji* 歲時廣記 (ca. 1200–66), as published in *Shiwan juan lou congshu* 十萬卷樓叢書 (1876–92); see *Baibu congshu jicheng* 百部叢書集成 edn. (hereafter *BBCS*) 38, pp. 8b–9a. The headnote is “Suishi zaji” 歲時雜記, which I have not located, but perhaps refers to “various records of seasonal festivals.” The Su Che poem is “Dongzhi ri zuo” 冬至日作 (“Written on the Winter Solstice”), which is in *Luancheng sanji* 樂城三集 (edited in 1111), j. 3, printed in Chen Hongtian 陳宏天 and Gao Xiufang 高秀方, eds., *Su Che ji* 蘇轍集, in *Zhongguo gudian wenxue jiben congshu* 中國古典文學基本叢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1990), pp. 1193–94. For Su Che’s biography, see Herbert Franke, ed., *Sung Biographies*, Münchener ostasiatische Studien 16 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1976; hereafter, *SB*) 2, pp. 882–85.

Earlier references, in very similar language, to the vulgar custom of counting the nines are attributed in the standard encyclopedic dictionaries to Zong Lin’s 宗慄 (fl. mid-6th c.) *Jing Chu suishi ji* 荆楚歲時記, but I have not yet found the quotation in available editions. The Tang official Xue Neng 薛能 refers to the exhaustion of the solstice’s nine-nines and the greening of vegetation in his poem “Han miao qi yu hui yang chun ting you huai” 漢廟祈雨



Figure 2. Kai Tai tu

Anon. artist (Yuan or Ming); pictorial textile. National Palace Museum



Figure 3. Welcoming Spring

Anon. artist (Yuan or Ming); pictorial textile. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

with the scholar-official Fan Chengda 范成大 (1120–1193). He transcribes counting-the-nines rhymes that follow the summer and winter solstices and, in doing so, begins a record that continues to modern times. Each set of rhymes tracks the nines through eight couplets (the initial two nines combined in the first), which traverse the seasonal round from the solstice to the period of maximum heat or cold, and thence through moderating climate and on to the ascent of the complimentary cold or hot season. Thus, the winter solstice's first and second nines are represented by folks keeping their hands in their sleeves as they greet each other; the rhyme then enters the bitter third nine, when the wind whistles along the palings like pipes, then greets the return of the sun in the fifth nine, and sets cats and dogs competing for a shady spot during the eighth nine. With the completion of the ninth nine, people bring out agricultural implements and prepare for the new season of planting. The entry concludes with the arch observation that, "Master Fan, being a man of Wu, could not avoid using village talk, that is, colloquial dialect."<sup>14</sup> Texts like *Suishi guangji* and *Baoyin jitan*, along with other scholarly and palace texts, frequently exhibit uneasiness about the mixing of elite and vulgar modes of marking the seasonal round.

Visualizations of the winter solstice nines as pictorial textiles, paintings, and charts seem to have begun in the Yuan period (1279–1368). In the extant visual record, the emperor's goats-and-boys tapestry finds its pre-

回陽春亭有懷, in Cao Yin 草寅 et al., comps., *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 (pref. 1707; rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua, 1979), vol. 17, j. 559, p. 6486.

<sup>14</sup> There are two versions of this text in Tao Zongyi 陶宗義 (14th c.) et al., comps., *Shuofu sanzong* 說郭三種 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1988): the 100-j. *Hanfen lou* 涵芬樓 edn. (j. 7, pp. 18a–b), in *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 1408, attributes *Baoyin ji tan* to an anonymous Song author; and the 120-j. *Wan wei shan tang* 宛委山堂 edn. (20, pp. 5a–b), in vol. 3, p. 984b, attributes it to (Song) Zhou Zundao 周尊道. Because the latest date mentioned in the text is 1262 it cannot be the Zhou Zundao who was a *jinshi* of 1097.

The subsequent textual record of nine-nines counting rhymes and songs is notably consistent within individual strands; variant characters often are homophones, suggesting transcription from oral performance. There exist also regional, urban, scholarly and imperial variations on the theme. Summer solstice rhymes sometimes pass out of notice for a time and are pronounced extinct; they reappear later in the record (see Bickford, "Counting the Nines"). The counting songs are treated among the customs attending winter solstice in many modern folkloric studies and articles, including Zhang Jiangcai 張江裁 (b. 1908), comp., *Beiping suishi zhi* 北平歲時志 (Beiping: Guoli Beiping yanjiuyuan shixue yanjiuhui 國立北平研究院史學研究會, 1936), j. 21; Mary Anderson and Kuo Li-ch'eng, "Tung Chih," *Echo Magazine* (Dec. 1974), pp. 6–11; Kuo Li-ch'eng 郭立誠, "Dong Jiujiu yu xia Jiujiu" 冬九九與夏九九, in his *Zhongguo minsu shihua* 中國民俗史話; *Hanguang congshu* 漢光叢書 8 (Taipei: Hanguang, 1983), pp. 55–60; and Nakamura Kyō 中村喬, *Chūgoku saijishi no kenkyū* 中國歲時史の研究 (Kyoto: Hōyū shoten, 1993), pp. 420–51. For Fan Chengda's biography, see *SB* 1, pp. 308–9; for Tao Zongyi's, see L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1976; hereafter *DMB*) 2, pp. 1268–72.

decessors in pictorial textiles in the National Palace Museum, Taipei (figure 2) and The Metropolitan Museum of Art (figure 3), and in paintings like "Infant at Play" (figure 4), and its many contemporaries and successors.<sup>15</sup>

The fourteenth-century textual record, meanwhile, provides the earliest notice of a participatory approach to counting the nines that would have a long history in Chinese visual culture. At the end of the Yuan or the beginning of the Ming (1368–1644), Yang Yunfu 楊允孚, in *Luanjing zayong* 滌京雜詠, nostalgically recalled the customs of the capital and court in self-annotated verses. He included in his book a group of poems that follow the seasonal round. One of them reads:

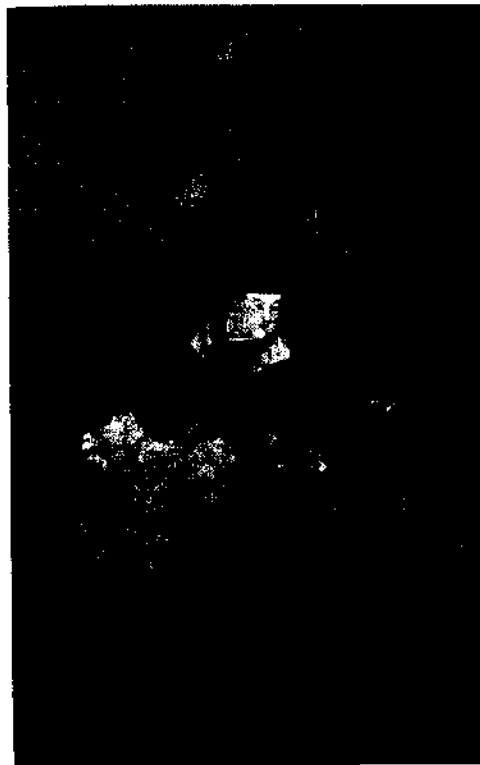


Figure 4. Yuanren xiying tu  
Anon. artist (Yuan); hanging scroll.

試數窗間九九圖	Just count off the window's Nine-nines [counting] chart.
餘寒消盡暖回初	'Til lingering cold has all run out and warmth's returning starts.
梅花點遍無餘白	[When] plum-blossom dots show no trace of white spots
看到今朝是杏株	[Then] what you see this morning is flowering apricots.

<sup>15</sup> For the NPM and MMA pictorial textiles, see above, n. 9. The NPM textile has been dated variously to the Song, Yuan, and Ming periods. Although *SQB* Xu enters the NPM textile as a Song-dynasty work, Watt and Wardwell, *When Silk Was Gold*, no. 59, p. 194, argue for a Yuan date for its composition on the basis of Mongol costume and the Mongol custom of teaching children to ride goats (no source given); most paintings of the subject matter share these features. The painting "(Yuan) Infant at Play" ("Yuanren xiying tu" 元人戲嬰圖; NPM, anonymous Yuan; hanging scroll, ink and color on silk) is reproduced in color in National Palace Museum, *Gugong shuhua tulu* 故宮書畫圖錄 (Taipei: NPM, 1989; hereafter *GGIL*) 5, p. 205. The NPM collections hold many such paintings (depicting three, nine, or eighty-one sheep and goats), e. g., *ibid.* 2, pp. 75, 79; 3, pp. 111, 235, 251, 253, 255;

Yang's note explains what the "Nine-nines Chart" 九九圖 is and how to use it:

After winter solstice one pastes a [painted or printed (?)] branch of flowering plum on the windows. Everyday, when the ladies put on their morning makeup, they take rouge and draw a circle. With the completion of eighty-one circles, it has been transformed into apricot blossoms and just then warm [weather] has returned.<sup>16</sup>

Text and image are conjoined in a "Nine-nines-disperse-the-cold chart" 九九消寒之圖, dated in correspondence to 1488 (figure 5; ink rubbing). A plum-blossom counting-chart, which recalls Yang Yunfu's description, occupies the center field: inserted in a vase (*ping* 瓶 itself being an auspicious rebus for "peace" – *ping'an* 平安), is a flowering-plum spray, bearing nine clusters, each comprising nine buds or petals, making up the eighty-one white spots to be filled in day by day. Surrounding this image are nine panels that replicate the sequence by means of landscape pictures that are inscribed with poems. Proceeding from the lower left in clockwise fashion, the snowy landscapes grow more and more forbidding as the cold deepens, then indicate moderation and the return of warmth, with farmers ploughing in the eighth frame, and, in the ninth, a garden filled with blossoming trees as the nines exhaust their course. Sealing the sequence in the (tenth) bottom-center frame is an auspicious image (figure 6). A Nine-nines-disperse-the-cold-chart text fills the bottom panel of the rubbing.<sup>17</sup>

During the three hundred years between the carving of this image and the weaving of the Qianlong emperor's tapestry, references to Nine-nines-disperse-the-cold charts increased in frequency and detail in the guidebooks and memoirs of the late Ming and early Qing. In their guide to the capital city, *Dijing jingwu lue* 帝京景物略 (1635 preface), Liu Tong 劉侗 (d. 1637) and Yu Yizheng 于奕正 (d. ca. 1635) noted that on the day of the winter solstice, when officials went about in their ceremonial robes, congratulating one another on the end of winter, as if it were New Year's day, the people had other ways of marking the day:

5. pp. 113, 205, 267, 269, 343, 369, 377. Some of these works are assigned to named and anonymous Song artists; the paintings seem later, some much later.

<sup>16</sup> *Luan jing za yang* 深京雜詠, as printed in *Zhibuzi zhai congshu* 知不足齋叢書 (1769–1811), *Congshu jicheng*, no. 3180, xia, p. 8. On the dating and genre of the book, see Ji Yun 紀昀 et al., comps., *Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao* 四庫全書總目題要 (1782), in *Heyin Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao ji siku weishou shumu jinhui shumu* 合印四庫全書總目題要及四庫未收書目禁燬書目 (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1978) 4, p. 3555. I discuss 14th- to 20th-c. aspects of these charts in "Counting the Nines."

<sup>17</sup> Reproduced in Wang Shucun 王樹村, comp., *Zhongguo meishu quanji* 中國美術全集, *Huihua bian* 繪畫編, vol. 21, *Minjian nianhua* 民間年畫 (Beijing: Renmin meishu, 1985), p. 17. A similar rubbing is in the collections of the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore (accession no. 96.54).



Figure 5. *Nine-Nines-Disperse-the-Cold Chart*

Anon. ink rubbing; 1488.



Figure 6. *Detail of Figure 5*

Bottom-center panel.

On the day of the winter solstice, [people] paint a branch of bare plum, and make eighty-one petals; daily, they color one petal; and, [when] the petals are finished then nine-nines emerge, and the spring [season] has deepened. [These] are called "Nine-nines-disperse-the-cold pictures" 九九消寒圖.

There [also] are plainly made circles in nine clusters, each cluster comprising nine circles, which are printed and marketed. Attached is a "Nine-nines song" 九九之歌 that traces the climate from cold through heat. The song says ...<sup>18</sup>

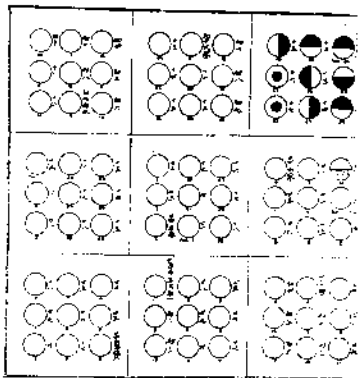
The Nine-nines text that follows clearly descends from the Southern Song winter solstice lyrics transcribed in *Baoyin jitan*, four hundred years before.<sup>19</sup> (For a modern nine-nines circle chart, see figure 7.)

Meanwhile, inside the imperial palace, people were hanging up paintings of goats and royal boys, and they were pasting up "Nine-nines-disperse-the-cold poetry charts" ("Jiujiu xiaohan shitu" 九九消寒詩圖) that were printed by the Directorate of Ceremonial (Sili jian 司禮監). We owe this notice to Liu Ruoyu 劉若愚 (1584–ca. 1642), the former grand eunuch who, from his prison cell, recollected the details of palace accoutrements and cuisine through the rounds of the festival year. Liu tells us only that the imperially-printed charts had a quatrain for each of the nines, and quotes the seven-character lines that begin and complete the cycle. He clucks at their vulgarity – "the sort of

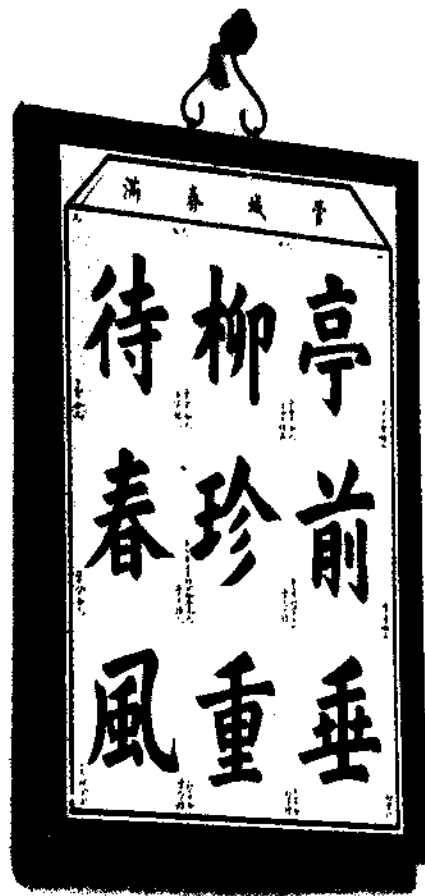
<sup>18</sup> *Dijing jingwu lue* 帝京景物略 (1635 pref.), sect. "Chunchang" 春場, in *Zhongguo wenxue cankao ziliao xiao congshu* 中國文學參考資料小叢書, collection 2, vol. 4 (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue, 1957) 2, p. 29. Liu Tong's biography is in *DMB* 1, pp. 968–70.

<sup>19</sup> See above, n. 14.

(below)  
Figure 7. Modern Nine-nines Chart



(right)  
Figure 8. Nineteenth-century Nine-nines Chart



vulgar expressions used in drum songs 鼓詞俚語之類” – and “not at all the kind of thing that court writers would compose at imperial command 非詞臣應制所作.” Liu does not know how they were transmitted; he just knows that they had been followed for a long time. He then notes that recently there have been many changes, with two or three kinds of “new-style poetry-line charts 新式詩句之圖.”<sup>20</sup> We do not know exactly what these charts looked like. The traditional charts may have resembled the 1488 rubbing (figure 5), which pairs a seven-character quatrain with a land-

<sup>20</sup> Liu Ruoyu 劉若愚, *Zhuozhong zhilue* 酌中志略 (before 1641), published in *Haishan xian guan congshu* 海山仙館叢書 (1845–85) 20, pp. 9a–b; read together with Lü Bi 呂燾, comp., *Ming gong shi* 明宮史, in *Xuejin taoyuan* 學津討原 (1805), *BBCS* edn., *huo* 火, pp. 8a–b. *Ming gong shi* is an abridged adaptation of *Zhuozhong zhilue*. For the relationships between the texts see *DMB* 2, p. 952. Jiang Zhiqiao 蔣之翹, *Tianqi gongci* 天啟宮詞 (pref. 1643), in *Xuehai*

scape image for each of the nines. The newfangled charts might be reflected in later imperial usage: counting the nines by filling in, stroke-by-stroke, nine nine-stroke characters from a line of imperial poetry, sometimes copied from the emperor’s hand (figure 8).<sup>21</sup>

By 1758, when Pan Rongbi 潘榮陛 compiled *Dijing suishi ji sheng* 帝京歲時紀勝, his account of the festival year in the capital city, the visual dimension of winter solstice practice had received further elaboration. Pan records the familiar Nine-nines-disperse-the-cold chart in the form of an outlined branch of plum, the eighty-one petals of which are to be darkened, one each day until the nines are finished. New in his account are a pair of scrolls that flank the chart and proclaim: “When the plum in the picture looks dark as can be / Then the grasses by the gateside are greening naturally 試看圖中梅黑黑 / 自然門外草青青.”<sup>22</sup>

There is in these accounts a dimension of participation in the advancement of the seasonal round from cold winter to warming spring that one is tempted to characterize as efficacious performance: dabbling on rouge, filling in petals, or circles, or brushstrokes all help to disperse the cold and expedite the return of warmth. Such everyday acts of marking time (and, in doing so, perhaps, also doing one’s part to help insure the timely passage toward the desired temporal goal) are not unknown in the West – think, for instance, of Advent calendars or of crossing off the days to the end of the semester.

*Dijing suishi ji sheng* brings us close to the time and place of the emperor’s tapestry. It also places the emperor, his pictorial textile, and his in-

*Xuehai* (1831), *BBCS* edn., p. 21a, also recognized innovations in late-Ming palace Nine-nines-disperse-the-cold songs: the old songs all used vulgar language, but the new-style ones were much improved – “without a single common phrase.” In the same way that Song predecessors had shown dismay at the seepage of Nine-nines songs between popular and literati cultural spheres, Liu and Jiang recognized porosity between common and courtly observance of the nines and were especially uncomfortable about textual manifestations of (literal) vulgarity at court; Bickford, “Counting the Nines.” Liu’s biography is in *DMB* 1, pp. 950–53.

<sup>21</sup> These charts and their popular modern printed copies are often attributed to the Ming emperor Xuanzong 宣宗 (r. 1426–36). However, extant charts from the Old Palace (fig. 8) are associated with Qing Xuanzong 宣宗 (the Daoguang emperor [r. 1820–50]). Liu Ruoyu notes that such charts were recent innovations at the end of the Ming. Furthermore, the earliest notice that I have found of a chart made from a line of Xuanzong’s song lyrics, written in his own hand and copied in outline, to be filled in day by day, occurs in an entry entitled “Jiujiu xiaohan” 九九消寒 in Xu Ke 徐珂, *Qing bai lei chao* 清稗類鈔 (pref. 1916; Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1917), sect. “Shiling lei 時令類,” p. 45. The chart Xu describes (both text and variations on the inscribed title, “Guancheng chunse” 管城春色) evidently formed the basis for many later charts in the palace and in popular practice, persisting to modern times. For a palace chart made for the reign-year Guangxu 31–32 (1905–06), see Fu, “Jiujiu xiaohan tu”; for a modern chart, see Anderson and Kuo, “Tung-chih.”

<sup>22</sup> Pan Rongbi 潘榮陛, “Xiaohan tu” 消寒圖, *Dijing suishi ji sheng* 帝京歲時紀勝 (pref. 1758; Beijing: Beijing guji, 1981), p. 37.



scription in the context of contemporary popular culture: inside the palace and outside its walls, people pass the winter optimistically counting the nines in traditional visual images. But what of the boys who look after the sheep in the Qing imperial tapestry (figure 1), in its possible prototype (figure 2), and in the 1488 “Jiujiu xiaohan zhi tu 九九消寒之圖,” where the auspicious tenth image (figure 6), which stands as the culmination of the transit of its nine predecessor images, displays a goat escorted by three boys? We need not speculate. The Qianlong emperor will explain.

*Counting Sheep: Sanyang kai Tai 三陽(羊)開泰*

Having begun his colophon, discussed above, by stating that the nine sheep and goats (*yang* 羊) stand for nine male-units (*yang* 陽) in his “Dispersing-the-Cold-[by]-Counting-the-Nines Image,” the emperor went on to extract a second, interlocked, auspicious rebus. Turning to the figures in his tapestry, he wrote: “The meaning of ‘Males [numbering] three initiate the Tai 男三開泰’ is even more fitting.” Again, we can see the boys in the picture (figure 1) but they do not seem up to anything special. This again is

a visual play on words and images: “nan san” 男三 (three male [children]) is a back formation of “sanyang” 三陽 (three male elements), as it occurs in the phrase “Sanyang kai Tai 三陽開泰,” which is suggested in the wording at various points of the hexagram chart printed in *Suishi guangji* (figure 9).

We see in this chart that “Sanyang” are the three *yang* 陽, or solid, lines that form the bottom of the Tai 泰 hexagram. Like the “Nine nines,” the Sanyang cumulatively complete the transit from winter to spring, from the old year to the new, specifically the interval between the winter solstice and the first lunar month, or official New Year. The solstice is the pivot where *yang* 陽,

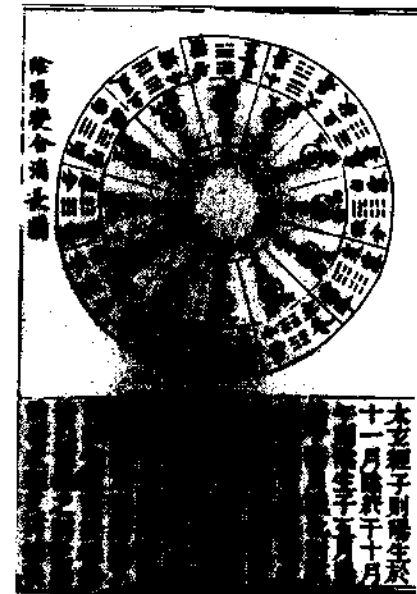


Figure 9. Chart Printed in *Suishi guangji*

having dropped to its nadir, begins to rise, to displace *yin* 陰, bringing with it warmth and renewal. The hexagram associated with the preceding month

in the *Suishi guangji* chart – the Kun 坤 hexagram – comprises only broken, or *yin*, lines. In the month of the solstice, the first *yang* line appears at the bottom of the Fu 復, or “Return (The Turning Point)” hexagram. Next month, two *yang* rise from the bottom of the Lin 臨, or “Approach” hexagram. And in the following month, the Sanyang achieve their completion: they open up 開 the Tai, or “Peace” hexagram, and the New Year begins. This happy course of events, replete with all the auspicious prospects inherent in the Tai hexagram,<sup>23</sup> is, according to the emperor, embodied by the three boys.

The Qianlong emperor’s two readings of his pictorial textile owe little to imperial acuity or erudition; rather, they depend upon the ingenuity of the anonymous craftsman who clearly set out these messages in traditional visual forms for the emperor and others to see. In a manner typical of the economical exploitation of motifs in auspicious imagery, the designer of the tapestry (see figure 1) embedded two auspicious rebuses in a single composition. The “Jiu yang xiao han” reading, with which the emperor began, centers on the nine sheep and goats as key (see line 1 of the emperor’s verse, quoted above). In this context the three boys might appear to be mere adjuncts to their auspicious herd; now, in his second (improved?) interpretation of the image, the significance of the boys is made clear, as the same boys are taken as key to the “Sanyang kai Tai” rebus (line 4). In this new reading, the nine sheep and goats that embodied the *jiuyang* in “Jiuyang xiao han” are pressed into double duty: they also can be parsed as three visual iterations of the *Sanyang* in “Sanyang kai Tai.”

First of all, the full-form “Sanyang kai Tai” rebus is displayed in the outsized central motif – a richly-robed boy mounted on a goat, flanked by a pair of black and white goats. Here, the goats stand for the *yang* lines of the hexagram and the royal child, the *taizi* 太子, stands for the auspicious Tai hexagram that comprises them. The black and white goats seen here, and in many similar paintings, may represent *yin* and *yang* elements.<sup>24</sup> Below this group, and to its right, three goats gambol by the waterside; and, third, below and left of this group, are a pair of boys with three white rams.

So far we have enumerated the following items in the auspicious inventory of the emperor’s tapestry:

<sup>23</sup> See Richard Wilhelm, trans. (Cary F. Baynes, trans.), *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, Bollingen Series 19, 3d edn. (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1967), pp. 48–52, 440–45.

<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to Hugh R. Clark for pointing out this possibility. Indeed, most images show some black and some white sheep and goats or dappled sheep and goats.

1. three boys;
2. nine goats and rams;
- 3-5. three sets of three goats or rams; and
6. the royal boy and three goats.

But the designer did not stop there. The auspicious imperative drove him to load up his image further. The main motif – in whatever medium or form, hanging scroll or vase or bowl – was augmented with as many appropriate, auspicious motifs as the design coherently could hold.

Therefore the rocks rising up the middle of the scroll are rocks of longevity. The ribbon issuing from the mouth of the mounted goat, swirling over the long-life rock, streaming above it and into a canopy of long-life pine, is not just goat's breath. It is *yangqi* 陽氣, or male vapor, associated with the winter solstice and the official New Year. It points to the powerful generative force marshaled in these massed *yang* motifs: *yangqi* produces boys; and, boys – replete with young *yang* – produce more *yang* and more boys, and so forth, forever.<sup>25</sup> Underlying all this *yang* and radiating from it is the ancient conflation – oral and written – of *yang* 羊 (sheep or goat) and *xiang* 祥 (auspicious), to which we turn later.

It is in this context that the “Three Friends of the Cold Season” (pine, bamboo, and plum) enter the picture. They support the main subject matter in two ways: they are, at once, effectively deployed design elements and, most importantly, auxiliary auspicious motifs. Whatever their associations and attributes in other poetic or pictorial venues, in this case pine, bamboo, and plum emanate luck as emblems of the New Year, of longevity, and of renewal.<sup>26</sup>

### THREE RAMS AND THREE FRIENDS: AUSPICIOUS VISUALITY IN CHINA

The evidence of the emperor's tapestry, and its myriad kindred images, leads to a simple idea. However gorgeous and complicated (or, for that matter, plain and abbreviated) it may be, auspicious art is a practical art; everything counts and all good motifs must work to bring people luck. We can categorize this pictorial textile as “Landscape with Figures and Rams” but that, in a way, is to put the cart before the goat. This is not primarily a landscape picture into which boys and goats have been arbitrarily inserted

<sup>25</sup> I am grateful to Charles Hartman for suggesting this line of interpretation.

<sup>26</sup> The camellia at the lower right corner of the image similarly serves a dual function: as a symbol of the New Year and as a framing device.

to make a nice wintry scene. Rather, the maker of the auspicious image has availed himself of the hanging scroll format and landscape composition as a way of organizing lucky motifs – *yang*, *nan*, *taizi*, *yangqi*, plum, rock, pine, bamboo – into a coherent image. And we would do well to recognize this priority and its consequences in the case of flower-and-bird paintings and other genres too.

The composition of the emperor's tapestry (figure 1) represents a relatively recent development in the long, long history of auspicious image-making in Chinese visual culture. In early China, auspicious images appear as “singles,” or as multiples of an individual motif, as various motifs arrayed in strings or grids, or in sets or geometric configurations (like the animals of the four directions), or in complex interrelationship (as in the Mawangdui banner and coffins). In pictorial programs they may work in conjunction with depictions of historical episodes, ceremonies, or scenes of everyday life, or may even be interpolated into such scenes. In all these presentations they always visually announce what they are – efficacious images.

But by Song times, the representational achievements of landscape and flower-and-bird painting presented vehicles for organizing efficacious images in new ways – through plausible, life-like pictures. Some artists used gorgeous colors and meticulous technique to paint symbols of good fortune, for instance, peonies, which stood for “riches and rank 富貴.” Other artists constructed lucky rebus paintings in which they organized combinations of plants, animals and birds whose names taken together formed visual puns on auspicious words or phrases. For example, finely painted pictures of playful cats (*mao* 貓) and butterflies (*hudie* 蝴蝶) embodied wishes for long life (*maodie* 耄耋, “to attain seventy or eighty years of age”); and lively scenes in which the artist caught three long-armed gibbons in the act of stealing baby egrets from their nest (*san yuan de lu* 三猿得鷺) extended a congratulation for, or a wish for, taking top honors in the civil service examinations by visually encoding the phrase *san yuan de lu* 三元得路 (“A triple-first gains [one] power”) in images of marauding monkeys and frantic fledglings.<sup>27</sup> the Qianlong emperor's tapestry and its predecessors (figures 2 and 3) are outcomes of this process.

It is a measure of the designers' pictorial achievement that such images do not simply pile up a hodgepodge of lucky stuff. Instead they do their

<sup>27</sup> For cats and butterflies see Tokyo National Museum, *Kisshō*, no. 120, and Nozaki, *Kisshō*, no. 70. Bai, “Image and Word,” pp. 57–63, treats *san yuan de lu* extensively (I use his translation of the auspicious phrase; *ibid.*, p. 57), and discusses other Song rebus paintings and principles of rebus making in premodern China.

work of making luck by creating a fictive world in which boys and goats, plum, bamboo, and pine, all seem to exist casually and naturally together, supposedly observed by the artist who captures the moment in an engaging vignette. Here the coherence of design, the even-tempered handling of the motifs, and the easy plausibility belie the vignette's disparate sources: in fact, the Sanyang (sheep and goats) and the Sanyou (Three Friends – pine, bamboo, and plum) have utterly different prior (and later) histories in literature and material culture.

Images of sheep and goats (in part because of the 羊 / 祥 conflation, as reflected, for instance, in the explanation of 羊 found in *Shuowen* 說文) make a strong appearance in the arts of early China.<sup>28</sup> A brief review of Han-era yang manifestations suggests an impressive range of materials, functions, and contexts.<sup>29</sup> Mirror inscriptions often employed the 羊(祥) graph to express wishes for great good fortune: 大吉祥. As an ornament, yang was replicated in the quadrants of roof tiles, perhaps multiplying luck through replication and through repetition along the eave edge. Molded mounted rams formed the base for lucky gilt-bronze money trees, and the many recumbant ram lamps may have added “brightness” to yang's lucky store of associations. Rams seem to have played a role as evil-repelling or luck-attracting images in mortuary contexts, where they appeared as effigies on molded bricks and in Luoyang tombs, and as wall paintings in which they took their place among an array of auspicious images. A bronze seal displaying three rams in silhouette (figure 10) presents the tantalizing possibility that our “Sanyang kai Tai” rebus was seen



Figure 10. Three-Ram Seal

Bronze; Han era.

<sup>28</sup> See “yang” 羊 in *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji, 1988) 4A, pp. 32B–33A; 145A–B.

<sup>29</sup> The history of yang (sheep, goat, ram) in Chinese material culture certainly could be taken back to Shang inscriptions and objects such as the “Four-ram” zun (Wen Fong et al., *The Great Bronze Age of China* [New York: MMA, 1980], no. 20) or the “Eumorfopoulos Double-Ram” zun in the British Museum (Jessica Rawson, *Ancient China: Art and Archaeology* [London: British Museum Publications, 1989], color plate 2 [facing p. 81]), but I will use Han examples because the range of realized possibilities and contexts is better suited to my purpose here. For a selection of relevant texts, gleaned principally from the early literature on ritual, and for a selection of objects, see Florence Waterbury, *Early Chinese Symbols and Literature: Vestiges and Speculations, with Particular Reference to the Shang Dynasty* (New York: E. Weyhe, 1942), pp. 56–63. I am grateful to Victor Mair for introducing me to this work.

in Chinese visual culture as early as the Han dynasty.<sup>30</sup> In contrast to their impressive display in visual culture, rams, sheep, and goats, have not much presence in belletristic sources. They occur of course in early literature, for instance in texts that treat sacrifices, feasts, and farm life. But as a theme per se, yang held little charm for writers. Not many people wrote poetry in praise of sheep, nor (aside from auspicious pictures and patterns) are they important motifs for painting.<sup>31</sup>

Plum, bamboo, and pine, on the other hand, have individually and, from Song times on, collectively accrued rich literary traditions and become major motifs in later decorative art and painting, especially scholar-amateur painting. But they are not important in the material culture of early China.<sup>32</sup> During the Song, in literature, arts, and crafts, these three plants emerge as a composite, three-in-one motif – variously called the “The Three Friends” (*sanyou* 三友), or “Friends of the Cold Season,” (*suihan you* 歲寒友). In Song literature, the expressive scope of Three Friends meanings and associations include longevity, renewal, loyalty, and integrity in adversity. Frequently, the Three Friends – sometimes as a named triad,

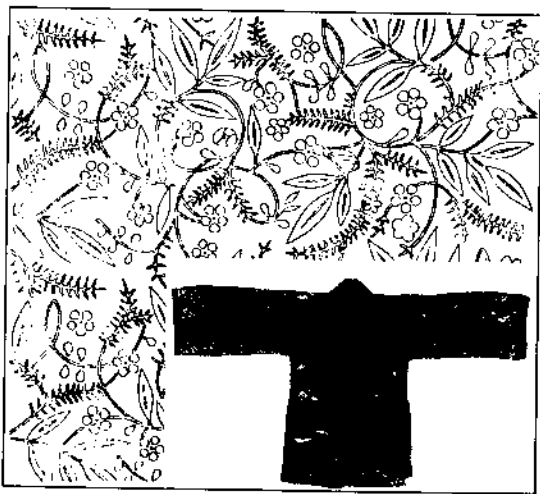
<sup>30</sup> The bronze seal (Hunan Provincial Museum; Han) is reproduced in Hunan Provincial Museum. *Hunansheng bowuguan cang guxi yinji* 湖南省博物館藏古璽印集 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1991), p. 107. I am grateful to Bai Qianshen for reference to the seal and for providing a picture.

Many examples of the other categories of objects reviewed could be adduced; following are merely one or two of each: mirror bearing “da jixiang” 大吉羊(祥) inscription in which yang 羊 is read as xiang 祥 (Tokyo National Museum; dated 205, in Tokyo National Museum, *Kisshō*, no. 60); Warring States or Qin roof tile with sheep-horns distributed in quadrants (Bai, “Image as Word,” fig. 8); money tree with mounted ram base (Tokyo National Museum; 1st–2d c. AD, in Tokyo National Museum, *Kisshō*, no. 56); lamp in the form of a recumbent ram from the Han tombs at Mancheng, Hebei (150–200 BC, Institute of Archaeology, CASS and Hebei CPAM, eds., *Mancheng Han mu fajue baogao* 滿城漢墓發掘報告 [Beijing: Wenwu, 1980], color plate 10 and pl. 34); brick with ram's-head relief (Tokyo National Museum; 1st c. BC–1st c. AD, reportedly from Rongyang 榮陽 *xian*, Honan, in Tokyo National Museum, *Kisshō*, no. 57); ram's-head relief in Luoyang Tomb M61 (ca. 48–7 BC; *Luoyang-shi di'er wenwu gongzuo dui* 洛陽市第二文物工作隊, Huang Minglan 黃明蘭, and Guo Yinqiang 郭引強, comps., *Luoyang Hanmu bishu* 洛陽漢墓壁畫 [n.p.: Wenwu, 1996], pl. 14, p. 100); winged ram among an array of auspicious creatures painted on the walls of Eastern Han Tomb no. 1, at Wangdu 望都, Hebei (ca. 182 AD; Jan Fontein and Wu Tung, *Han and Tang Murals Discovered in Tombs in the People's Republic of China and Copied by Contemporary Chinese Painters* [Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1976], nos. 7–9, illustrations and discussion).

<sup>31</sup> For historians of scholar-amateur painting, the great exception to this lack of interest in yang is Zhao Mengfu's 趙孟頫 (1254–1322) “Sheep and Goat” (ink-on-paper handscroll, Freer Gallery-Sackler Museum). For the painting, its colophons, and interpretation, see Chu-ting Li, “The Freer Sheep and Goat and Chao Meng-Fu's Horse Paintings,” *Artibus Asiae* 30 (1968), pp. 279–326, with illustrations.

<sup>32</sup> For the flowering plum, see Bickford, *Bones of Jade, Soul of Ice: The Flowering Plum in Chinese Art* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1985), and idem, *Ink Plum*. For the individual motifs, see Bickford, “Ink-bamboo, Ink-plum, Ink-flowers,” in *The Dictionary of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1996) 6, pp. 802–7.

often simply appearing together – figure in occasional lyrics written at the New Year or composed for birthdays. Manifestations of this new motif during the Song period take forms that range from the woven patterns of a lady's satin jacket (figures 11 A–B) to the ink-painting (figure 12) of the scholar-amateur master Zhao Mengjian 趙孟堅 (1199–1264).<sup>33</sup> Significantly, for our purposes, sprays and sprigs of pine, bamboo, and plum appear in an anonymous twelfth- or thirteenth-century painting of street celebrations



Figures 11A–B. Duan Jacket from the Tomb of Huang Shen (d. 1243) and Rendering of Its Woven Pattern, Showing Stylized Pine, Bamboo and Plum

held in conjunction with the turning of the New Year, or with welcoming spring (figure 13), where we see them tucked into the headgear of the celebrants.<sup>34</sup> Subsequently, the Three Rams and the Three Friends are brought together in auspicious images like the Taipei textile (figure 2).

Extant visual evidence indicates that the Three Rams and the Three Friends came together in solstice images of the Yuan-Ming period. Why, at this point, though, do these two sets

<sup>33</sup> For the Three Friends, see Bickford, *Bones of Jade* (esp. the views of Hans H. Frankel and Mary Gardner Neill, pp. 161–63, 206–13), and idem, *Ink Plum*. On the manifestations and meanings of the flowering plum and the Three Friends in Song material culture (including the jacket and the ink painting), see *ibid.*, pp. 33–37, and figs. 7–16, and idem, “Textiles as Texts.” Zhao Mengjian’s biography is in *Song Biographies: Painters*, no. 17 in *SB* ser., pp. 2–7.

<sup>34</sup> “Danuo tu” 大儺圖 (“Picture of Driving Away Plagues and Devils”), anonymous Song; hanging scroll, ink and color on silk; Palace Museum, Beijing; reproduced in color in Zhu and Hutt, *Treasures of the Forbidden City*, no. 34. For extensive discussion, see Sun Jingchen 孫景波, “Danuo tu mingshi bian” 大儺圖名實辨, *WW* (1982:3), pp. 70–74, and plate 6.



Figure 12. Zhao Mengjian, *Three Friends of the Cold Season*  
Undated album leaf.



Figure 13. *Da nuo tu*  
Anon.; 12th–13th c.

its attraction. Auspicious images are both grounded in tradition and attracted to fashion. Towards the end of the Song and in the Yuan period, the Three Friends rapidly rose in popularity as a motif in literature, painting, and the decorative arts. Although they contributed no essential elements to the construction of the core rebuses “Jiu yang xiao han” or “Sanyang kai Tai,” they proved to be effective and efficacious in other, desirable ways.

Pine and plum are useful large motifs, effective as framing devices, expansive and exciting in their contorted forms, while bamboo serves as a useful small motif to be spotted here and there, enlivening the larger design. These motifs offer opportunities for virtuosic needlecraft and the building up of a dazzling, opulent surface in the rendering of rough bark, shiny blossoms, sharp pine needles and sprightly bamboo. The plants are seasonally consistent with the theme and enhance its pictorial plausibility as a landscape with figures. The Three Friends contribute their own associations with the New Year and, most importantly, they bring their own store of auspicious associations. Moreover, most likely during the Yuan period, they lent an air of modern fashionability, providing the patron with an image that was efficacious and up-to-date.<sup>35</sup> No matter if Three Rams and Three Friends came from very different traditions and had no earlier association in text or image. The maker of an auspicious image would have found no constraints in chronology or in prior context. He used all sorts of combination and recombination of ancient and recent, aristocratic and vulgar motifs in order to embody good wishes and amass luck. He was constrained only by what he saw around him and what he could envision. In a manner characteristic of auspicious visuality, the image maker finds his motifs where he will and weaves them into a charming, elegantly produced picture of boys playing at goat-herds on a winter's day.

Henceforth these motifs march together. The composition of the Taipei textile (figure 2) is elaborated in The Metropolitan Museum of Art's panel (figure 3).<sup>36</sup> The central “Sanyang kai Tai” rebus is the subject of many paintings like “Infant at Play” (figure 4) in the National Palace Museum, Taipei.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> The attraction that modern elements exerted upon later makers of traditional auspicious images can be seen clearly in *nianhua* popular prints; e. g., the use of Western illusionistic techniques in Suzhou prints, or the fascination with Western costumes, machines, or objects such as bicycles. For Song examples of interpolating flowering plum, as a fashionable, expressively enhancing accessory motif, into the illustration of a Tang poem that makes no mention of this plant, see Bickford, *Bones of Jade*, fig. 8, anonymous Song, “Lady beneath Bamboo” (Cat. 8), discussion, p. 49 and note 54, p. 285.

<sup>36</sup> The MMA textile displays eleven sheep and goats (including a large, saddled ram led by a groom), together with a child goatherd, and pine, bamboo, and plum.

<sup>37</sup> See above, n. 15.

Such paintings probably stand behind the “Sanyang kai Tai” motifs that appear on the festival textiles and badges that proliferated during the Ming period. Thus, surrounded by lucky filler motifs, the boy rides his goat into spring, back and forth, again and again, bearing his load of good wishes along the length of bright Ming brocades (figure 14).<sup>38</sup>

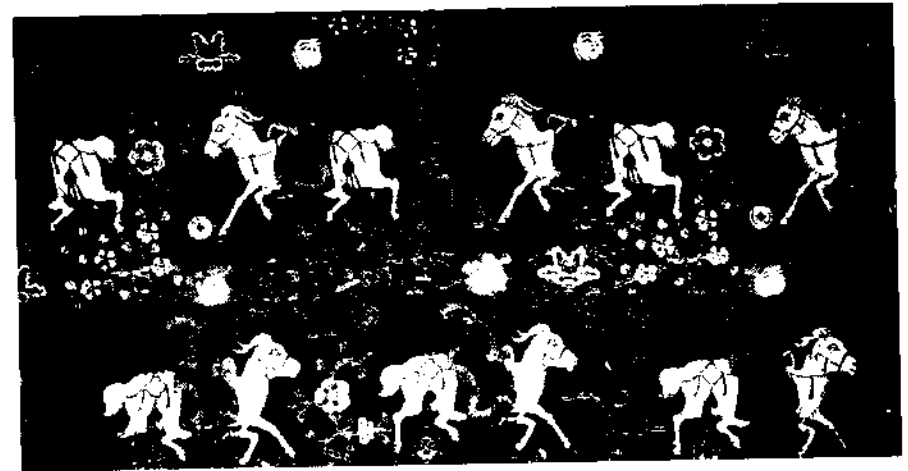


Figure 14. Brocade with Repeat Pattern of Boy Riding Ram; Ming (1368–1644)

Textile designers further condensed lucky solstice images into composite repeat motifs comprising plum blossoms, rams, and *taiji* disks that stand for *taiyang* 太陽, the Great Yang, or sun, whose imminent waxing is marked by the winter solstice festival.<sup>39</sup> The good fortune associated with rising *yang* achieves maximum concentration in a combination winter solstice and birthday textile, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (figure 15). A pattern of stunning expressive economy, it displays solstice plum and ram, with emanating *yangqi*, wafting aloft (like the speech balloons of modern comic-book characters), swastikas flanking a *taiji* disk, configured to suggest the character *shou* 壽, which, in Schuyler Cammann's reading, forms the visual pun “Wan wan shou!” 萬萬壽 [Ten-thousand, ten thousand years], the appropriate salutation on the emperor's birthday.<sup>40</sup>

These textiles evoke Liu Ruoyu's recollections of the “*yang*-producing

<sup>38</sup> Several versions of this brocade (of which fig. 14 is one) are held by textile-art, London.

<sup>39</sup> A Ming brocade held by John Eskenazi, London, displays this motif.

<sup>40</sup> Cammann, “Ming Festival Symbols,” p. 69. Cammann's article was the initial stimulus for my present work on auspicious visuality.

textiles” 陽生綿 and “yang-producing badges” 陽生補子 that were worn at

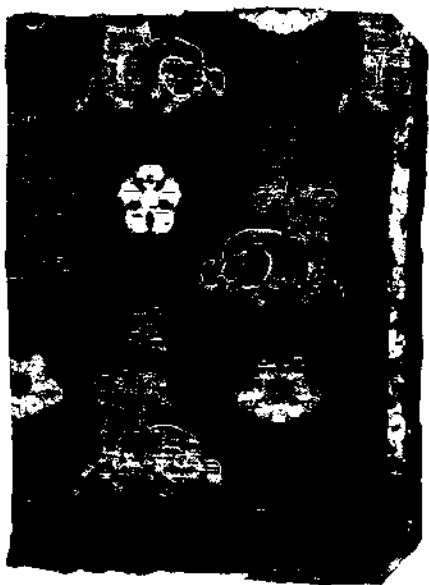


Figure 15. Robe Fragment with Winter-Solstice Festival Pattern

Silk satin brocade; 16th-17th c.

the Ming court during its winter solstice festivities.<sup>41</sup> The excavations of the Ming imperial tombs, have yielded many festival textiles, costumes, badges, and accessories, including a pair of “Sanyang kai Tai” knee-wrappers (figure 16) from the tomb of the Wanli emperor (r. 1573-1620) and his empress Xiaoduan, née Wang 孝端王氏, who were buried in 1620. Here, the “big ram” at the center stands for *taiyang*.<sup>42</sup>

This brings us back (or forward) to the emperor’s tapestry (figure 1). For emperors, as for others, auspicious images were the site where good fortune and virtue meet. In 1772, at the start of a new year, he composed and inscribed an essay, entitled “Ex-

plication of ‘Sanyang kai Tai’” (“Sanyang kai Tai shuo” 三陽開泰說). He had the text inscribed on an old “Sanyang kai Tai” painting in his collection, and he again inscribed this text in his own hand on a painting (figure 17) that he said he copied from a “Sanyang kai Tai” painting by the Ming emperor Xuanzong (r. 1426-1436).<sup>43</sup> After a lengthy disquisition on the Tai hexagram in the *Book of Changes* and its commentaries, the emperor



Figure 16. Rendering of a duan Knee-Wrapper

Excavated from tomb of Wanli emperor and empress; buried 1620.

concluded his “Explication” by exhorting his officials to nurture the people and preserve peace: to “*bao Tai* 保泰,” a phrase that also was carved on the imperial seal that the Qianlong emperor impressed upon his calligraphy handscroll and upon this painting.

The efficacy and appeal of “Jiuyang xiaohan” and “Sanyang kai Tai” images outlived the dynastic system. In the old palace, the deposed emperor Puyi 溥儀 (r. 1909-1912) traced lucky double-gourd patterns, configuring his nine-nine quatrains in “Dis-

persing-the-cold diagrams,” while his household prepared for spring by making him “Nine-nine charts” that still used his reign-years to designate the nines.<sup>44</sup> Outside the walls, in the markets, “Jiuyang xiaohan” and “Sanyang kai Tai” images circulated in

reproduced in color in *GGTL* 11, p. 91, and is recorded in National Palace Museum and National Central Museum, comps., *Gugong shuhua lu* 故宮書畫錄 (Taipei, 1950; rev. 2nd edn. Taipei: NPM, 1965), vol. 3, j. 5, p. 553. Following his transcription of “Kai Tai shuo,” the emperor writes that he made the painting in imitation of a “Kai Tai tu” by Ming Xuanzong and that the court painter Zou Yigui 鄒一桂 (1686-1772) added the rocks and flowers. An example of Xuanzong’s treatment of the subject, also bearing Qianlong seals, survives in the NPM collections: “Ming Xuanzong hua Sanyang kai Tai tu” 明宣宗畫三陽開泰圖 (hanging scroll; ink and color on paper; dated 1429), reproduced in *GGTL* 6, p. 145; recorded in Zhang Zhao 張照 (et al., comps., *Shiqu baoji* 石渠寶笈 (1745; facs. rpt., Taipei: NPM, 1971) 2, p. 1119A. Qianlong’s painting does not look like this painting, save for the device of an overhanging rock with plants. (Of course this need not have been the only Ming imperial prototype available to Qianlong.) Qianlong’s painting appears to be a copy of a painting by Lang Shining 郎世寧 (Giuseppe Castiglione [1688-1766]), dedicated, signed, dated 1746 by the artist, and bearing Qianlong’s title inscription: “Kai Tai tu” (NPM; hanging scroll, ink and color on paper), reproduced in *GGTL* 14, p. 21; recorded in *Shiqu baoji sanbian* 5, p. 2472B. The sheep are closely copied; the subsidiary foreground and background rocks, trees and plants are different in shape and style.

<sup>44</sup> For the history of such images and charts in the late-Qing palace and particularly in the practice of the deposed emperor Puyi 溥儀 (r. 1909-12), see He, “Xun Qing huangshi”; Li, “Puyi yu Jiujiu”; and Fu “Jiujiu”; and Bickford, “Counting the Nines.”

<sup>41</sup> Liu Ruoyu, *Zhuozhong zilueh* 19, p. 9a (textiles), and 20, p. 9a (badges).

<sup>42</sup> Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan kaogu yanjiu suo 中國社會科學院考古研究所 and Dingling bowuguan 定陵博物館, Beijing shi wenwu gongzuo dui 北京市文物工作隊, *Dingling* 定陵, *Zhongguo tianye kaogu baogao ji* 中國田野考古報告集, *Kaoguxue zhuan kan* 考古學專刊, dingzhong 丁種 no. 36 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1990). For the knee wrappers, see vol. 2, fig. 241.

<sup>43</sup> The calligraphy handscroll is recorded in *SQB*Jxu 5, pp. 2419B-20A. The “old painting,” “Yuanren Sanyang kai Tai tu” 元人三陽開泰圖 (NPM; hanging scroll, ink and color on paper), is reproduced in *GGTL* 5, p. 269; it is recorded in *SQB*Jxu 5, p. 2784A; the transcription is not dated. The emperor’s painting bearing his “Kai Tai shuo” inscription, “Qing Gaozong yu bi Kai Tai shuo ping fang Ming Xuanzong Kai Tai tu” 清高宗御筆開泰說并仿明宣宗開泰圖 (NPM; hanging scroll, ink and color on paper; undated, after New Year’s, 1772), is



Figure 17. Qianlong Emperor and Zou Yigui, Kai Tai tu,  
After Painting by Ming Xuanzong

Undated (after New Year, 1774).

their most popular form, as cheap prints (figure 18) sold under mat sheds around winter solstice time. People pasted them up, then tossed them away, replaced them with New Year's pictures, with Demon Quellers, and would buy them again at the same time next year. Were all the folks who bought them able to read? Could the readers among them discourse on the Tai hexagram? It did not matter. If images of the Three Rams inspired some to make learned reflection on the principles of the *Changes*, many others in the marketplace, drawn by the colorful wares of the print stalls, and mindful of the time of year, needed only to choose what pleased their eyes from the print-seller's seasonal stock. These images were bright and they were right to paste on windows, doorposts, and beds just in time for the shortest day of the year. Whether or not people gave them much thought, these images worked for them just the same and, at the very least, they responded to the attractive appropriateness of the images, parted with coins to acquire them, installed them in their homes. The art of the auspicious constituted a common code that communicated across millennia and across boundaries of region, class, and literacy to efficaciously embody the aspirations for long life, progeny, and peace shared by emperors, scholars, and laborers – wishes that were expressed in monumental works of art and in the ephemera of everyday life.



Figure 18. Sanyang Kai Tai

Anon. artist (19th–20th c.); colored woodblock print.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BBCS	<i>Baibu congshu jicheng</i> 百部叢書集成
DMB	<i>Dictionary of Ming Biography</i>
GGTL	<i>Gugong shuhua tulu</i> 故宮書畫圖錄
MMA	The Metropolitan Museum of Art
NPM	National Palace Museum, Taipei
SB	<i>Sung Biographies</i>
SQBJxu	<i>Shiqu baoji xubian</i> 石渠寶笈續編

## APPENDIX: Full Captions and Acknowledgments for All Illustrations

Figure 1. Anonymous artist(s) (18th-c.), “Jiuyang xiaohan tu” 九陽消寒圖 (“Nine-Yang-Disperse-the-Cold Picture”); colophon by the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–96); dated 1781/82. *Kesi* 絛絲 tapestry with added embroidery, 213 x 119 cm; Palace Museum, Beijing. After Huang Nengfu 黃能馥, ed., *Yinran zhi xiu* 印染織繡, vols. 6 and 7 of *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Gongyi meishu bian* 中國美術全集工藝編 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1985 & 1987) 7, no. 184.

Figure 2. Anonymous artist(s) (Yuan [1279–1368] or Ming [1368–1644] dynasty), “Kai Tai tu” 開泰圖 (“Kai Tai Picture”); hanging scroll; silk tapestry with silk embroidery, 217.1 x 64.1 cm; National Palace Museum, Taipei. (PMPD photograph); courtesy, National Palace Museum.

Figure 3. Anonymous artist (Yuan [1279–1368] or Ming [1368–1644] dynasty), “Welcoming Spring”; silk, horsehair, and embroidered gauze, 213.3 x 63.5 cm; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, The Dillon Fund Gift, 1981 (1981.410). Courtesy, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 4. Anonymous artist (Yuan dynasty [1279–1368]), “Yuanren xiying tu” 元人戲嬰圖 (“Infant at Play”); hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 90.4 x 56.1 cm; National Palace Museum, Taipei. (PMPD photograph); courtesy, National Palace Museum.

Figure 5. Anonymous artist, “Jiujiu xiaohan zhi tu” 九九消寒之圖 (“Nine-Nines-Disperse-the-Cold Chart”); dated 1488; ink rubbing. After Wang Shucun 王樹村, comp., *Zhongguo meishu quanji* 中國美術全集, *Huihua bian* 繪畫編, vol. 21, *Minjian nianhua* 民間年畫 (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1985), p. 17.

Figure 6. Detail of fig. 5. After Wang Shucun 王樹村, comp., *Zhongguo minjian nianhua shi tulu* 中國民間年畫史圖錄 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1991) 1, no. 35.

Figure 7. Modern Nine-nines chart. After Mary Anderson and Kuo Li-ch’eng, “Tung Chih,” *Echo Magazine*, Dec. 1974, p. 8.

Figure 8. 19th-c. Nine-nines chart. Calligraphy of the Daoguang emperor (r.

1820–50); Palace Museum, Beijing. After *Daily Life in the Forbidden City: The Qing Dynasty, 1644–1912* (Harmondsworth and N.Y.: Viking, 1988), originally published as *Qingdai gongting shenghuo* (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1985), fig. 376.

Figure 9. “Yin Yang bianhe xiaochang tu” 陰陽變合消長圖. *Suishi guangji* 歲時廣記, comp. Chen Yuanjing 陳元靚 (ca. 1200–1266), *Shiwan juan lou congshu* 十萬卷樓叢書 (1876–92), *Baibu congshu jicheng* 百部叢書集成 edn., *shoujuan* 首卷. n.p.

Figure 10. Three-ram pictorial seal. Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD); bronze; 1.6 x 1.5 cm; Hunan Provincial Museum. After *Hunansheng bowuguan cang guxi yinji* 湖南博物館藏古璽印集 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1991), p. 107.

Figure 11A. *Duan* 緞 jacket with woven pattern of pine, bamboo, and plum; Southern Song period, mid 13th-c.; excavated from the tomb of Huang Sheng 黃昇 (d. 1243), Fuzhou, Fujian. After Fujian Provincial Museum, *Fuzhou Nansong Huang Sheng mu* 福州南宋黃昇墓 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1982), plate 35.

Figure 11B. Drawing of the *duan* 緞 woven pattern of fig. 11A. Woman’s jacket; pattern unit 10 x 17 cm; Southern Song period, mid 13th-c.; excavated from tomb of Huang Sheng 黃昇 (d. 1243), Fuzhou, Fujian. Pattern unit 10 x 17 cm. After Fujian Provincial Museum, *Fuzhou Nansong Huang Sheng mu* 福州南宋黃昇墓 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1982), plate 59.

Figure 12. Zhao Mengjian (1199–1264). “Three Friends of the Cold Season.” Undated; album leaf; ink on paper; 32.2 x 53.4 cm; National Palace Museum, Taipei. (PMPD photograph). Courtesy, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Figure 13. Anonymous artist, “Da nuo tu” 大難圖 (“Picture of Driving away Plagues and Devils”). Song dynasty, 12–13th-c.; hanging scroll; ink and color on silk, 67.5 x 59 cm; Palace Museum, Beijing. After Maggie Bickford, *Ink Plum: The Making of a Chinese Scholar-Painting Genre* (New York: Cambridge U.P., 1996), fig. 6.

Figure 14. Brocade with repeat pattern of boy riding a ram. Ming (1368–1644). Photograph courtesy of textile-art, London.

Figure 15. Ming festival pattern for the winter solstice; robe fragment; 16th–17th c.; silk satin brocaded with silk and gold-metallic thread; 37 x 27.5 cm; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 07.850. Gift of Denman W. Ross, 1907. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reproduced with permission © 2000. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, All Rights Reserved.

Figure 16. Drawing of a *duan* 緞 knee-wrapper embroidered with “Sanyang kai Tai” 三陽開泰. Ming, Wanli period (1573–1620); excavated from the tomb of the Wanli emperor and his empress Xiaoduan, née Wang 孝端王氏 (buried 1620). After Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan kaogu yanjiu suo 中國社會科學院考古研究所, Dingling bowuguan 定陵博物館, Beijing shi wenwu gongzuo dui 北京市文物工作隊, *Dingling* 定陵, *Zhongguo tianye kaogu baogao ji* 中國田野考古報告集 *kaogu* (xue zhuan kan 考古學專刊, ding zhong 丁種 no. 36 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1990) 2, fig. 241.



Figure 17. The Qianlong emperor and Zou Yigui (1686–1772), “Qing Gaozong yu bi Kai Tai shuo bing fang Ming Xuanzong Kai Tai tu” 清高宗御筆開泰說并仿明宣宗開泰圖. Undated (after New Year, 1772); hanging scroll; ink and color on paper; 127.7 x 63 cm; National Palace Museum, Taipei. (PMPD photograph); courtesy, National Palace Museum.

Figure 18. Anonymous artist (late-Qing [19–20th c.]), “Sanyang kai Tai” 三陽開泰; colored woodblock print; 24 x 34 cm. After Wang Shucun 王樹村, *Zhongguo jixiang tu ji cheng* 中國吉祥圖集成 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1992), no. 138.