

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Visual ritual and political dissemination: The Confucian imagery mechanisms in a mirror for the emperor during the Ming Dynasty

Meng Duan, Lee Hoi Yeh*

Faculty of Arts, Sustainability and Creative Industry, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjung Malim 35900, Perak, Malaysia

* Corresponding author: Lee Hoi Yeh, leehoiyeh@fskik.upsi.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the important visual text "A Mirror for the Emperor", exploring how it transforms Confucian "rites" into social norms through visual mechanisms. Unlike previous studies that mainly remained within the fields of textual analysis or political history, this paper approaches it from the perspective of visual culture and etiquette dissemination, analyzing its unique value as a "visual etiquette mechanism". Methodologically, this study combines Panofsky's three-level analysis method of iconography, visual semiotics, and political etiquette theory to conduct in-depth interpretations of the three core images: "Appointing Talents for Governance", "Warning Stelae and Criticism Boards", and "Filial Piety Ascending to Heaven". At the same time, this study pays attention to its regional reconfiguration in Shandong, Henan, and Shaanxi, revealing the recontextualization process of these images in local academies, temples, and families. Additionally, this study draws on Cosmological Ethics and normative social psychology to examine how these visual symbols construct the paradigm of normative compliance. The research on Ming Dynasty etiquette images also confirms that the visual presentation of natural symbols reinforces society's understanding of "the harmony between heaven and man", thereby extending the political admonition consciousness to a widespread reverence for cosmic order and social order. The research results indicate that the visual mechanism of "A Mirror for the Emperor" mainly manifests in four aspects: Firstly, through elements such as postures, objects, and spaces, it constructs a stable visual grammar, making "rites" have systematic expressibility; Secondly, the images align with the political tensions of the Wanli period and become symbols of admonition; Thirdly, the regional re-production realizes the cycle of "central generation - local adaptation", promoting the diffusion of the ritual system in grassroots society; Fourthly, the visual medium transforms ethical norms into daily learnable postures, strengthening social integration. The academic contributions of this study can be summarized as four points: expanding the artistic history perspective beyond textual studies; emphasizing the cultural function of etiquette in visual communication; integrating iconography and etiquette theory to reveal the interaction mechanism between visual and power; and placing Chinese etiquette images within the academic discourse of global visual culture and cross-cultural comparison.

Keywords: A Mirror for the Emperor; Confucian ritual system; visual culture; political dissemination; regional reproduction

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1. Introduction

In the grand narrative of Chinese art history, the system of ritual (li) has always been an essential cornerstone for maintaining political and social order. Since the pre-Qin period, Confucian "ritual" has not only regulated daily life and political behaviour, but has also been continuously represented through material and visual forms. From inscriptions on bronze vessels, ritual music and dance, to Han dynasty stone carvings and mural bricks, ritual has been endowed with both institutional and symbolic functions in images^[1]. After the Han and Tang dynasties, with the maturation of the national political centre and the systems of ancestral temples and academies, the role of ritual in social and national order became increasingly prominent^[2]. At the same time, ritual images gradually assumed the dual role of sustaining imperial power and promoting social education, with their political and ethical functions continuously reinforced through painting and imagery^[3].

In the Ming dynasty, the political function of ritual became even more prominent, not only institutionalized in court ceremonies but also reflected in the visual culture as a means of constructing political authority^[4]. *A Mirror for the Emperor*, an important visual text of the Wanli period, is a typical example of the combination of ritual and visual elements. It is not only a political admonition book but also a cultural mechanism that integrates ritual thought and visual narrative. Through the combination of images and text, abstract ethics are materialized and symbolized, allowing both the Emperor and the general public to receive reaffirmations of political legitimacy and moral education through intuitive visual narratives^[5]. This not only reflects the Ming court's emphasis on the dissemination of images but also reveals the institutional role of images in social education and the legitimization of power.

However, *A Mirror for the Emperor* has long been marginalized in academic research. This gap, as^[6] points out, reflects the geographical imbalance in the global turn of visual studies. In China, most studies have focused on versions, authorship, and transmission, with limited analysis of image mechanisms and the inherent ritual meanings^[7]. Western scholars, on the other hand, have paid more attention to style and aesthetics^[8]. The discussion of its ritual and political functions is limited, and even within the framework of visual culture and communication studies, such visual texts rarely enter the core discussions. The lack of a cross-cultural comparative perspective echoes the judgment that related studies on the cross-cultural nature of visual texts remain scarce^[9]. Therefore, revealing its visual codes, political context, and communication mechanisms has become a key issue for deepening the study of Chinese art history and Confucian ritual systems.

With the development of visual culture and communication studies, research has increasingly focused on the role of images in social and environmental ethics. In particular, for ritual images like those in *A Mirror for the Emperor*, the question of how visual symbols convey moral norms and reinforce normative expectations has become an important issue.^[10] propose in their normative conduct theory that visual cues serve as crucial anchors for social norms, theoretically guiding individual alignment with collective expectations.^[11] analysed traditional Chinese images and argued that the visualisation of natural symbols is an effective means of conveying ecological ethics. This study draws on traditional imageology and semiotics, integrates the theoretical frameworks of cosmic ethics and social psychology, and further explores the dual functions of the images in "*A Mirror for the Emperor*" in disseminating social ethics and the sense of awe towards cosmic order.

Based on this, the following research questions are proposed: 1) How is Confucian "ritual" encoded as a systematic visual structure and symbolic grammar in the images of *A Mirror for the Emperor*? 2) How do these visual codes interact with the political context of the Ming dynasty and participate in the reproduction

of legitimacy? 3) How are the image mechanisms of *A Mirror for the Emperor* reinterpreted and reproduced in regional dissemination, and how do they present local differences? 4) How do these image mechanisms serve the legitimacy of imperial power and social education, and play multiple roles in broader cultural dissemination? To answer these research questions, this paper analyses iconology, visual semiotics, and political ritual theory.

The goal of this study is to reveal the image encoding of "ritual" in *A Mirror for the Emperor*, explain its interaction with the political culture of the Ming dynasty, examine its reproduction process in regional dissemination, and summarise its comprehensive functions in imperial legitimacy and social education. This study aims to deepen understanding of the intersection of art history, visual culture, and political communication and to address shortcomings in existing academic research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Confucian ritual system and visual culture research

Confucian "ritual" has been the foundation of political and cultural order in Chinese society since the pre-Qin period. Classical texts such as the Zhou Li and Li Ji not only regulated social functioning but also transformed ethical values into a daily order through ritual practices^[12]. Chinese scholars' research on the ritual system of the early Ming dynasty also provides a reference for the institutional history in this study.^[13] pointed out that during the Hongwu period, the compilation of the Da Ming Ji Li and the simplification and standardisation of the ritual system established the basic framework of the Ming ritual system. This process not only laid the institutional foundation for imperial legitimacy but also made possible the subsequent extension and reproduction of ritual systems in the visual realm. The visual expression of ritual is a crucial means for its wide dissemination. From inscriptions on bronze vessels, ritual music, and dance to Han dynasty stone carvings and mural bricks, ritual images serve both institutional and symbolic functions^[1]. Scholars generally agree that since the Han and Tang dynasties, ritual images have gradually transcended simple temple decoration and become essential media for maintaining imperial power and social education^[14].

In the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, ritual images became increasingly complex. The social function and dissemination scope of Ming ritual images continuously expanded: they gradually took on the dual mission of maintaining imperial power and promoting social education. In the unique context of the late Ming, where imperial power weakened and factionalism intensified, ritual images, with their characteristic of "visual clarity and unquestionability," became central visual resources for political legitimacy^[15]. Subsequently, ritual images broke through the limitations of court ceremonies and temple rituals, spreading to broader social levels through various media such as painting, printmaking, and sculpture. This dissemination trend benefited from the prosperity of the folk printing industry driven by the Ming dynasty's commercial economy. Upon entering local society, these images were not merely replicated from the central paradigm. Still, they were transformed into public carriers of family memory and tools of moral admonition that regulated daily behaviour^[16]. Among various ritual themes, the status of filial piety has continued to rise. Its image symbols (such as kneeling, serving, and auspicious clouds) were progressively strengthened as core social ethical symbols in Ming visual culture, becoming key visual links between private virtue in the family and public morality in the state^[17]. The image mechanism of *A Mirror for the Emperor* is a concentrated embodiment of this series of developments.

In recent years, scholars have begun to focus on how "ritual" is transformed into a visual mechanism. Some studies emphasise how "ritual" is institutionalised through images, such as temple dance illustrations and murals^[18]. Other studies emphasise the reproduction of "ritual" in the dissemination process, such as the

variants of local temple murals and New Year prints in different regions^[16]. Meanwhile, new interdisciplinary research also points out that the visualisation of ritual is not limited to historical contexts, but continues to play a role in contemporary political and cultural dissemination^[17]. These studies provide essential references for understanding *A Mirror for the Emperor*, making it not only a book of political admonition but also a key link in the visualisation of Ming ritual culture.

Cosmological ethics focuses on the relationship between humans and nature.^[19] explicitly states that natural symbols in traditional visual culture are essential carriers of cosmological awareness and that their role in shaping collective environmental cognition far exceeds that of textual narratives. The natural symbols in *A Mirror for the Emperor*, such as auspicious clouds, radiant light, and ancient trees, are not merely decorative elements but serve as visual metaphors for "heavenly order" and "harmonious nature." This symbolic system objectively conveys a reverence for the natural order.^[20] further confirm, in their study of East Asian traditional images and ecological cognition, that the natural symbols in such ritual images can indirectly influence society's environmental behaviour choices through the construction of cultural identity. This provides the core theoretical support for interpreting *A Mirror for the Emperor* from a cosmological ethics perspective.

2.2. A Mirror for the Emperor and related image studies

As an essential text of the Wanli period, *A Mirror for the Emperor* combines the deeds of historical figures with Confucian ethics, emphasising the principles of learning from history and of using ritual to transform individuals. Academic research on this book can generally be divided into three directions: version studies, ideological background, and artistic characteristics.



Figure 1. Painting of imperial mirror illustrated-part 1: The sage's wisdom and the virtuous. Rule 01: The Virtuous Governance of Ren Xian. Painted by Shen Zhenlin of the Qing Dynasty. Calligraphed by Pan Zuyin. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

In version studies, scholars have commonly focused on the publication date, circulation versions, and author identity of *A Mirror for the Emperor*. The background of the publication under Pan Yunduan is closely related to the political atmosphere after the Wanli period's political crisis and Zhang Juzheng's reforms^[5]. By comparing the editions and surviving images from different regions, researchers confirmed that it was not only an educational book but also had a distinct political admonition function^[7].

In terms of ideological background, ^[14] revealed the institutional tradition of "admonition images," noting that *A Mirror for the Emperor*'s composition and symbolic use echo the Portraits of Emperors of Past Dynasties;^[21] further demonstrated that this tradition also permeates broader Confucian narrative illustrations.

The continuation of this tradition makes *A Mirror for the Emperor* not only a product of the specific political culture of the Ming dynasty but also part of the broader East Asian chain of imperial admonition images.

Regarding artistic characteristics, scholars have gradually recognised the uniqueness of *A Mirror for the Emperor* in image composition, narrative style, and the use of symbols. For example, its figures often detach from specific historical details and emphasise symbolic gestures and objects that represent core Confucian values such as loyalty, filial piety, and virtue. This symbolism not only enhances the readability and educational function of the images but also highlights their institutionalised characteristics.

In addition, scholars have noted the dissemination and reproduction of *A Mirror for the Emperor*. Some editions spread to local schools and ancestral halls, even becoming integrated into local ritual practices. These studies show that *A Mirror for the Emperor* was not only a political text for the court and the literati but also played a significant role in the wide dissemination of ritual systems at the social level. This perspective provides an essential reference for understanding its cultural function in the interaction between central and local societies^[22].

2.3. Iconology, semiotics, and political ritual theory

At the methodological level, Western scholars' theories have provided significant inspiration for the study of *A Mirror for the Emperor*. Panofsky's three-level iconological analysis (pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation) helps reveal the multilayered structure of *A Mirror for the Emperor*, from visual representation to cultural meaning^[23]. For example, at the pre-iconographic level, one can analyse figures' postures and the arrangement of objects; at the iconographic level, symbols such as loyalty, filial piety, and virtue can be interpreted; and at the iconological level, one can reveal the underlying political logic of Ming dynasty political culture.

Visual semiotics further expands this method. Kress and van Leeuwen's "visual grammar" theory emphasises how images construct meaning through composition, viewpoint, colour, and symbolic techniques^[24]. Applying this theory to *A Mirror for the Emperor*, we can understand how it uses symbols such as the "drum of advice" and "filial piety" to transform abstract ethics into visual political discourse.

Political ritual theory provides the institutional dimension for understanding the interaction between images and power, a point also validated in other East Asian artistic traditions^[25]. Bell^[26] pointed out that rituals are not only symbolic performances but also practices that construct social order and power relations. Foucault^[27] also highlighted the close relationship between vision and discipline in his power theory. Mitchell^[28], from the perspectives of iconology and communication studies, noted that images not only represent political order but also shape viewers' cognitive frameworks.

Chinese scholars have also gradually attempted to combine these theories with Chinese painting. For example, some studies interpret *The Portrait of Saints and Worthy Men* as an intersection of "admonition painting" and "Confucian art," emphasising its role in institutional space and visual tradition^[29]. These studies provide essential comparative perspectives, allowing us to understand better *A Mirror for the Emperor*'s unique position within the image-ritual-political mechanism.

In conclusion, existing research provides multi-dimensional references for understanding *A Mirror for the Emperor*, but there are still three shortcomings: first, most research remains at the level of version studies and lacks systematic iconological and semiotic analysis; second, there is insufficient attention to the regional dissemination and reproduction of *A Mirror for the Emperor*, failing to reveal its differentiated functions in different social spaces; third, there is a lack of interdisciplinary theoretical integration, preventing it from being placed in the global visual culture and political communication academic dialogue.

Therefore, this paper intends to build on previous research, drawing on Western scholars' methodological frameworks and combining empirical results from Chinese scholars, to delve into the "ritual" imagery mechanisms in *A Mirror for the Emperor* and its dissemination function, filling academic gaps and promoting interdisciplinary dialogue in art history, intellectual history, and communication studies.

3. Theoretical framework

The analytical methods in this study primarily include three aspects: iconology, visual semiotics, and political ritual theory. Lee and Khairani^[30] emphasized qualitative interpretation of teaching strategies in aesthetic-oriented educational practice, providing methodological inspiration for this study on the integration of painting and ritual. Panofsky's three-level iconological analysis helps reveal the visual structure and deeper meanings of a work^[23]; visual semiotics allows us to analyze the composition, symbols, and visual grammar of the images^[24]; and political ritual theory highlights how images participate in power relations and social practices^[26,27]. Regarding the research methodology, this paper draws on the qualitative research framework of^[31] and the thematic analysis strategy of^[32]. It also references^[33] on visual media and cultural memory, providing interdisciplinary support for case analysis. By combining these methods, this study not only delves into the visual mechanisms in *A Mirror for the Emperor*, but also reveals its role in political culture and its dissemination pathways.

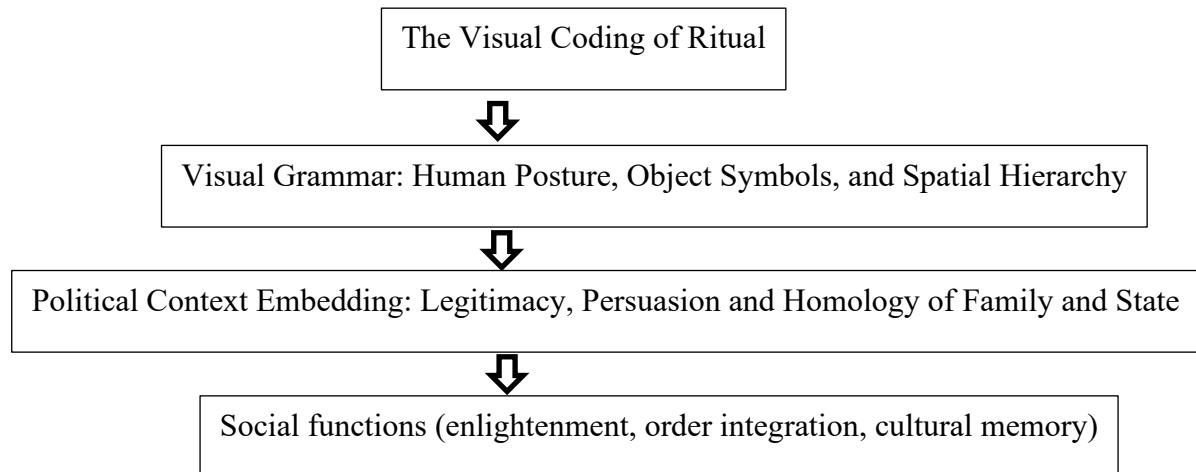


Figure 2. The image mechanism of "Ritual" in Imperial Mirror illustrated.

3.1. Iconology: Multilevel visual interpretation

As a key method in art history, iconology's core is the three-level analysis model proposed by Panofsky, which includes pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation^[23].

At the pre-iconographic level, the researcher needs to carefully observe the images in *A Mirror for the Emperor*, noting the figures' postures, attire, objects, and scene compositions. For example, the depictions of "The Drum of Advice" and "Filial Piety" are not only elements of historical narrative but also symbols repeatedly encoded in visual form.

At the level of iconographic analysis, these visual elements need to be linked to Confucian ritual concepts. The kneeling posture of the filial son corresponds to the ethical norms in the *Xiaojing* (Classic of Filial Piety). In contrast, the straight posture of the loyal minister reflects the duties of ministers as emphasised in the *Liji* (Book of Rites). By comparing the text and image, one can reveal how the visual form carries the meaning of Confucian "ritual"^[12].

At the iconological level, the research needs to further explore the function of these images in the political context of Ming society. For example, "The Appointment of Worthy Ministers" is not only a representation of a historical story but also a warning of the Emperor's attitude toward "appointing the worthy," forming a visual discipline^[5]. This interpretation shows that images are not merely narratives but part of political and cultural practices.

3.2. Visual semiotics: The grammar and dissemination of images

Unlike iconology, which emphasizes historical context, visual semiotics focuses more on the structural mechanisms and symbolic operations within images. ^[24] "visual grammar" theory highlights how images convey meaning through composition, space, viewpoint, and color.

Applying this theory, we can find that *A Mirror for the Emperor* has a highly institutionalized visual grammar. The figures' postures and positioning reflect ethical order. For example, in the scene of "The Drum of Advice," the Emperor is placed at the centre of the image, while the minister is positioned below, offering advice. This creates a visual representation of power relations. Objects and symbolic elements further reinforce the meanings of ritual, such as the "drum" symbolizing the system of verbal responsibility and the "tablet" representing bureaucratic order. These symbols are not merely decorative but are integral parts of the institutional visual grammar.

Visual semiotics helps us analyze the visual symbols in *A Mirror for the Emperor* and their effects on dissemination. Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar theory emphasizes how images convey meaning through composition, space, viewpoint, and color. These visual symbols not only function in political contexts but may also have social psychological impacts, functioning as 'visual directives' that reinforce established social norms. Snyder & Omoto^[34] suggest that the visualization of moral exemplars plays a central role in constructing the cognitive basis for prosocial motivation, while^[35] noted that the repeated dissemination of cultural visual symbols strengthens group ethical consensus from a social identity theory perspective. The dissemination of visual symbols serves to transmit social responsibility, influence individual behavior, and maintain collective ethics and social order. The impact of visual symbols on social behavior is not only realized through their dissemination but also through their "visibility," making them an integral part of social psychology. Therefore, the images in *A Mirror for the Emperor* not only carry Confucian ethics but may also influence viewers' perception and internalization of social responsibility norms.

In addition, visual semiotics emphasizes the "legibility" of images in the dissemination process. *A Mirror for the Emperor* uses a concise line-drawing style, allowing its images to spread widely in local academies, schools, and even among the general public. More recent research suggests that the mechanism of visual symbol dissemination is not limited to historical iconology discussions but extends into contemporary Chinese visual communication studies, demonstrating the enduring power of images in the construction of cultural and political discourse.

3.3. Political ritual theory: The visual reproduction of power

Political ritual theory provides an institutional perspective for understanding the function of *A Mirror for the Emperor*. Bell^[26] noted that rituals are not merely symbolic performances; they are practices that construct social order through repeated actions. Foucault's^[27] power theory emphasises the relationship between discipline and visibility, revealing how vision becomes an essential tool for political governance. Mitchell^[28] noted that images not only represent political order but also shape viewers' cognitive frameworks.

From this perspective, *A Mirror for the Emperor* is not only a book of admonition but also part of the political rituals of the Ming dynasty. By visualising Confucian core values such as loyalty, filial piety, and virtue, they become visible, learnable, and mimetic models. The use of these images in court lectures, local academies, and temple education constitutes a form of "visual ritual" that constantly reaffirms the order that the Emperor and his subjects should follow^[29].

At the same time, political ritual theory helps explain the reproduction of these images in regional dissemination. Recent research further indicates that traditional ritual images continue to acquire new symbolic meanings in contemporary culture, as seen in the transnational spread of Mazu's visual symbols across regional societies and networks, underscoring the ongoing role of visual rituals in social integration^[36].

In summary, the framework of this study includes three layers: first, using iconology to reveal the visual encoding of "ritual"; second, using semiotics to analyse its operation in political contexts; and third, using ritual theory to understand its role in legitimisation and education. This framework not only facilitates a detailed art-historical analysis of *A Mirror for the Emperor* but also extends to a broader analysis of its political and social functions, ultimately forming a multidimensional perspective on "image—ritual—dissemination." In other words, *A Mirror for the Emperor* is not only a product of Ming court political culture but also an important medium through which ritual is reproduced visually. More importantly, this framework situates Chinese ritual imagery within the global dialogue on visual culture and political communication, expanding the interpretive space for cross-cultural studies.

4. Case analysis: The Confucian imagery mechanisms in *A Mirror for the Emperor*

4.1. Case 1: The appointment of worthy ministers

The image of The Appointment of Worthy Ministers derives from the political paradigm of "appointing the worthy and capable," as exemplified by the legendary rulers Yao and Shun, a core concept of virtuous governance. The political tension of the late Wanli period brought a new semantic activation of this classical theme in *A Mirror for the Emperor*: the relationship between the worthy minister and the Emperor was no longer just a historical narrative replay but entered the daily scenes of court lectures and elite reading through a "visual discipline"^[4]. Thus, the image's value transcends the story itself and highlights political virtue in reality.

The composition of the image adopts a highly ritualised arrangement: the Emperor is placed centrally and elevated, with a restrained posture symbolising the focal point of governing order; the ministers are positioned lower, bowing and approaching, forming an upward ethical dynamic. The palace background and tiered steps together construct the ritual space of "audience—presentation," visually solidifying the governance logic of "appointing the worthy" within a readable order^[24]. Elements such as the tablet, crown, and ceremonial attire serve as grammatical markers, allowing viewers to understand the scene's normative structure without lengthy texts.



Figure 3. The imperial mirror illustrated: The first part-the sage's wisdom and the virtuous rules 01: The virtuous governance of Ren Xian. Created during the early Qing Dynasty. A water color painting on silk. A French export painting. The National Library of France.

It is important to note that the "worthy" in the image is not presented in isolation based solely on personal virtue but is placed within a political context that can be repeatedly invoked: the monarch publicly presents the act of "appointing" through gestures such as conferring, asking, and accepting; the minister, in turn, embodies the visible manifestation of "worthiness" through respectful posture.^[7] points out that this process of explanation and viewing forms a daily practice of political admonition; on a broader level,^[26] explains how rituals, through repetition, construct order and provide continuous legitimizing resources for political virtues.

The visualised "appointment of the worthy" does not emphasise the individuality of portraits but leans towards a typified representation of figures: simple facial expressions and standardised postures reduce individual variation to enhance the ethical paradigm's universal applicability. The image's re-telling of classical allegories thus presents a "de-individualized" aesthetic tendency, with the normative meaning of "worthiness" taking precedence over personal narrative. Similar expressions of loyalty and rectitude can also be found in other Ming dynasty murals^[37].

The image of The Appointment of Worthy Ministers not only reflect the ideal relationship between loyal ministers and the emperor, but can also be reinterpreted from the perspective of cosmic ethics. The natural symbols in the background, such as mountains, ancient trees, and auspicious light, form a visual intertext with the political rituals in the foreground, which is not incidental. Research has shown that incorporating these natural elements aims to visualize the connection between "heavenly mandate" and "virtuous governance," subtly implies a kind of cosmic ethical consciousness regarding "a wise ruler achieving harmony". In the context of the Ming dynasty's thought on the unity of heaven and humanity, these natural symbols not only symbolize the legitimacy of governance but also convey reverence for "divine will" and the natural order. This visual consistency between political ethics and cosmic ethics aligns with O'Neill's^[19] "visual symbolism" theory, providing a framework for understanding the cultural concept of "heaven-earth interaction" conveyed through traditional visual resources.

Overall, *The Appointment of Worthy Ministers* uses a clearly structured scene layout and a highly constrained ritual grammar to crystallize abstract principles of virtuous governance into an actionable visual paradigm. It translates the question of "how to govern" into "how to view the scene," thereby reaffirming governance ethics within the order of viewing^[5].

4.2. Case 2: The drum of advice and the wooden board



Figure 4. The imperial mirror illustrated Painting-Part 1: The sage's fragrant rules 02: The drum of remonstrance and the tree of accusation. Created in the early Qing Dynasty. Water color on silk. French export painting. Collection of the National Library of France.

In contrast to the emphasis on the emperor-minister relationship in *The Appointment of Worthy Ministers*, *The Drum of Advice and the Wooden Board in A Mirror for the Emperor* highlight the institutionalized tradition of the admonition mechanism. During the Pre-Qin and Han periods, the drum symbolized the calling for justice, while the wooden board represented written advice, forming a tangible and visible mechanism of admonition between the people, ministers, and the Emperor. In the Ming dynasty, although the original system of these instruments had dissipated, their concept of "being able to appeal and be heard" remained embedded in cultural memory. *A Mirror for the Emperor* reintroduces this concept into the court space through imagery, bringing the idea of "accepting advice" back into the realm of visual engagement^[38].

The composition places the "drum" and "wooden board" along the central axis of the visual field. The minister faces the Emperor's throne while the Emperor sits elevated, forming a vertical communication pattern. The drum symbolises the procedural initiation of the system, while the wooden board symbolises recording and documentation. Together with the palace steps and ritual ceremonies, these elements form a "ready-to-trigger—ready-to-record" symbolic device, turning "giving advice" from a moral proposition into a repeatable institutional gesture through the visual grammar^[37].

This recontextualization means that even if the political reality does not always welcome advice, the image still serves as a "stage for the ideal system," repeatedly presenting order. The viewer is placed in a predetermined visual trajectory, progressing from objects to positioning and actions, completing a ritual lesson on "how to speak and how to respond." This "institutional memory" is not a simple reproduction of historical systems, but is visually rewritten into an "expected order"^[28].

Further, the dual forms of "sound" and "writing" in the image (the instant sound of the drum and the enduring written word of the wooden board) create a time structure for political communication: the immediate trigger and long-term accountability are juxtaposed, giving the "advice" practice both ritual performance and archival governance functions. Therefore, the image of "The Drum of Advice and the Wooden Board" is not merely a nostalgic reminder of ancient customs but is visually equipped with a normative logic still applicable today. Similar didactic admonition grammar can be seen in Ming and Qing prints .

The "Drum of Advice" and "Wooden Board" not only demonstrate political power relations, but their repetitive visual presentation may be achieved through the social psychological mechanism of normative compliance, thereby reinforcing the recognition of ethical hierarchies. Snyder & Omoto^[34] found in their experimental studies that traditional images featuring "responsibility symbols" can significantly enhance the salience of ethical norms in visual cognition, while^[19] observed that disseminating such ritual images could strengthen collective public responsibility identity within groups. In the context of A Mirror for the Emperor's dissemination, the "public participation" and "responsibility" symbolised by "The Drum of Advice and the Wooden Board" not only reinforce recognition of political order but may also extend to concerns about public affairs. Through repeated visual reappearance in public spaces such as academies and ancestral halls, these images construct an idealized collective identity of 'participation and responsibility. This psychological tendency constitutes an important cultural foundation for the traditional social political ethical responsibility.

Overall, the meaning of advising is crystallised into a learnable gesture: the minister's positioning, the Emperor's gaze, and the centralised arrangement of objects constitute the "operational interface" of ritual. Viewing is not simply a passive reception; it is itself a mobilised political practice^[24].

4.3. Case 3: Filial piety and virtue ascending

If The Appointment of Worthy Ministers and The Drum of Advice focus on the relationship between emperor and minister, Filial Piety and Virtue Ascending highlights the ethical connection between the family and the state. This image combines family ethics with the cosmic order through visual narration: filial piety, perceived as the expression of heavenly will, thus has public value that transcends the private realm. Ming political culture often used the "filial piety-loyalty" correlation to emphasise the natural order of the emperor-minister relationship. A Mirror for the Emperor amplifies this logic into a visually comprehensible scenario in which respect within the family serves as the precondition for loyalty to the state .



Figure 5. The imperial mirror illustrated painting-part 1: The sage's fragrant rules 03: Filial piety and virtue. Created in the early Qing Dynasty. Watercolour on silk. French export painting. Collection of the National Library of France.

The image often depicts postures such as kneeling, serving, and asking after one's health, which represent familial ethics. The parents are placed at a higher level or in a hall, while the children are positioned below, with their posture reflecting the moral direction. Natural symbols such as auspicious clouds and radiant light often overlap with indoor scenes, suggesting a connection between "virtue" and "heavenly will." Ritual objects, family genealogy, and other details anchor familial ethics within ritual space.^[12] emphasises the intertextuality between family and state rituals. Such visual symbols help to socialise ethics through public visibility, thus avoiding the privatisation of filial piety.

This "family ritual-state ritual" intertextual relationship makes filial piety the foundation of political order: the respect for one's parents can be transformed into loyalty and trust towards higher authorities. The image does not present extraordinary individual stories but instead uses typified bodily postures and spatial representations to create a replicable ethical model. Therefore, ethics transcends private feelings and reaches the level of legitimisation of public order. This point is further amplified in the Ming dynasty's visual culture of filial piety^[17].

It is noteworthy that the image does not forcefully impose political slogans onto familial emotions but instead completes a soft manipulation of these emotions through "tangible" bodily postures and "inhabitable" ritual spaces: the path of "seeing, learning, and doing" is embedded in the warm narrative of filial affection.

The viewer's emotional identification spreads from within, completing the translation of ethics. This gradual visual governance embodies^[26] assertion that "rituals build order through repetition" and resonates with^[27] discussion of how "visibility is discipline," reinforcing the logic of the family-state relationship through viewing and performance.

Through this narrative, family rituals gain public significance, politics acquire personal affinity, and visuality gains normative power—all three elements unify in the image, subtly advancing without being overtly apparent.

4.4. Local communication and local variants

As a cultural product of the court and the scholar-officials' circles, *A Mirror for the Emperor* did not remain confined to elite scholarly circles. Through reprints, reinterpretations, excerpts, and accompanying texts, many of its images spread to local academies, ancestral halls, and festive spaces, even infiltrating daily life through forms like New Year prints and wall paintings. This created a multi-level circulation network from the court to the academy, temple, and household, with the visual language of ritual being repeatedly viewed and reviewed across a broader social spectrum.

The reproduction in different regions showed distinct emphases: in Shandong, the murals highlighted scenes of loyalty and admonition, aligning with local traditions of scholarly virtue and ritual; in Henan, reinterpretations often magnified filial piety themes, connecting local academies and family education; in Shaanxi, there was a preference for ceremonial compositions depicting the emperor-minister dialogue, visually emphasizing border stability and order. Local reproductions were often adapted to the Confucian educational needs, with ritual symbols prominently featured in temple murals. These differences do not deviate from the central text but reflect how the visual grammar of ritual was adapted to local societies. To provide a more precise comparison of regional reproduction characteristics, this paper organizes the differences across Shandong, Henan, and Shaanxi as follows (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Regional dispersal differences of imperial mirror illustrated.

Area	Content	Environment	Function
Shandong	Integrity and the practice of offering advice	The tradition of moral integrity and ethical values	Strengthening the Culture of Persuasion in the Group of Strongmen
Henan	The theme of filial piety	Academies and family instruction education	Make filial piety the core of social ethics
Shanxi	The scene where the minister and his subject are asking questions	The need for social stability in border regions	Emphasize the legitimacy of order and authority

The shift in media and locations reorganised the viewing relationship: from collective reading by teachers and students to shared observation during rituals, and finally to family cohabitation, with the ritual visual program continuously finding new realms of action. Foucault^[27] points out that the key to this shift lies in the fact that visibility itself is a disciplinary mechanism, shaping order and behaviour through repeated exposure.

Local artisans and scholars often made subtle adjustments during the re-interpretation process: simplifying clothing patterns, exaggerating gestures, and emphasising objects, making the images more "recognisable" and "usable." This functional style translation actually enhanced the ritual's teachability and reproducibility. Consequently, the authority of the central text was "softened" in local practice into a more operable, folk-based paradigm, with the ritual order reinforced through consistent, continuous viewing.

Looking at this diffusion chain, the visual mechanism of ritual presents a cyclical process of "central generation—local adaptation—re-centralised recognition." Successful local practices feed into elite discourses, becoming the basis for the next round of version revisions. The images do not move in a one-way direction from top to bottom; instead, they strengthen the imagination of order and moral consensus through their back-and-forth journey.

4.5. Comprehensive analysis

The core images and their local variants together show that *A Mirror for the Emperor* compresses ritual into a readable, executable, and reproducible visual grammar. Elements such as bodily posture, symbolic objects, spatial hierarchy, and the positioning of figures work together to create a pathway in which ethical propositions become "viewable—learnable—actionable." The images do not overwhelm with rhetorical flourishes but instead ensure understanding and reproduction through a prescribed program; they do not rely on emotional agitation to dominate reason, but instead stabilise order through the repetitive review of ritual spaces^[5].

The cross-spatial diffusion from the court to local regions caused this visual grammar to break away from a singular didactic logic, entering multiple social realms. It not only serves the public presentation of political legitimacy but also facilitates the daily immersion of community ethics. Studies further indicate that shared viewing remains an important way of sharing the "ought-to-be" in contemporary media studies.

More importantly, the image translates abstract virtues and institutional expectations into a "mimicable gesture system." This system of gestures can be practised in court rituals and family rituals, as well as enacted in academic lectures and ritual festivals. Viewing and reenacting themselves form a cultural memory mechanism^[33]. The relationship between visuality and practice ensures that ethics do not rely on a single command but rather on long-term viewing and reenactment.

In this sense, *A Mirror for the Emperor* is not a static "illustrated book," but a deployable social technology: it provides a public interface for moral governance through prescribed visual constructions, reinforces the stability of order through cross-media dissemination paths, and extends its social reach and depth through localised translation. It neither locks ethical virtues in the study nor locks institutional power in the palace, but continuously produces actionable ethics within the "visible." Based on the above case analysis, the significance of *A Mirror for the Emperor* within the broader visual ritual mechanism will be further explored in the discussion section below. To better present the differences and connections between the three major cases in terms of visual mechanisms, political context, and ethical themes, this paper provides a brief comparison in the following table (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. Three core cases and analysis dimensions of imperial mirror illustrated.

Case	Image mechanism	Political context	Ethical theme	Academic significance
Ren Xian's governance	The Sequence of Imperial Subjects and the Composition of Spatial Hierarchy	The relationship between the emperor and his ministers became tense during the middle and late periods of the Wanli reign.	loyalty and virtue	Visualizing the Principle of Virtue Governance as a Learnable Paradigm
The wooden pole used for admonishing and criticizing	The symbolic device of drum and wood	The Contradiction between Imperial Power and the Mechanism of Accountability	system of direct remonstration	Reconstructing the Lost Institution as the Visual Stage of Ideal Order

Case	Image mechanism	Political context	Ethical theme	Academic significance
The news of filial piety and virtue spread far and wide.	Kneeling, Banquet Hall and Genealogy Symbol	The political culture of isomorphism between family and country	filial piety and loyalty	The Translation of Family Ethics into the Normative Grammar of State Order

Table 2. (Continued)

5. Discussion

The case analyses in this study show that *A Mirror for the Emperor* institutionalizes 'ritual' through a stable visual grammar; embeds these visuals into political contexts, making them tools of legitimacy and discipline; forms a cultural network through regional reproduction, fostering interaction between the central and local; and ensures the continued relevance of 'ritual' in both social ethics and political order through its overall dissemination. These four aspects address the research questions posed in this paper and reveal the unique value of *A Mirror for the Emperor* as a visual ritual mechanism. This aligns with the conclusions of^[39], who emphasise the construction of value identity through aesthetic experience in educational practices, suggesting that art practices in different contexts play a role in cultural and ethical construction.

5.1. Visualising ritual

The core value of *A Mirror for the Emperor* lies in translating Confucian "ritual" into a stable visual grammar. Through the combination of elements such as figures' postures, symbolic objects, and spatial hierarchy, abstract moral propositions are fixed into a programmatic visual composition. Whether it's the minister-emperor hierarchy in *The Appointment of Worthy Ministers* or the kneeling posture in *Filial Piety and Virtue Ascending*, the tendency towards visual symbolism is evident. This symbolic tendency reflects institutionalised features in the Ming dynasty's visual system. Kress and van Leeuwen^[24] further explain how this symbolism constructs meaning through visual grammar, lowering the threshold of understanding and making "ritual" no longer an abstract concept but an internalised norm through repeated viewing.

5.2. Interaction between visuals and political context

These visual codes do not exist in isolation but are embedded in the specific political culture of the Ming dynasty. Chen^[7] reveals that the themes of *The Drum of Advice* and the *Wooden Board* correlate closely with the tense political context between the Emperor and his ministers during the Wanli period. Lin^[5], drawing on the book's publication background, points out the book's special function in political admonition. In a broader theoretical context, Bell^[26] emphasises how rituals build order through repetition; this analysis helps us understand how the images continually reaffirm the ideal order through their explanation and viewing. In other words, even if the political reality does not always align with the images, the act of viewing and dissemination itself forms a stage for legitimising authority.

These visual symbols not only represent political order but also likely construct a normative framework for viewers' understanding of social responsibility. Theoretical insights derived from^[40] suggest that presenting 'responsibility symbols' can enhance the psychological binding of ethical norms, thereby reinforcing collective identification with the moral order; Snyder & Omoto^[34] further demonstrated that recurring ritualistic moral images, through a process of visual habituation, reinforce the normalization of public responsibility discourses and prosocial behavior intentions; A cross-case review by IOSR suggests that simplifying responsibility narratives into quickly perceivable images is an effective strategy for enhancing the legibility of public duty. Through repeated visual reappearance in public spaces like imperial

lectures and academies, the visual symbols of "filial piety," "loyalty," and "virtue" in *A Mirror for the Emperor* not only shape ideal understandings of family and national order but also cultivate a collective psychology of "active participation and proactive responsibility" in viewers. This psychological tendency forms an important cultural foundation for traditional socio-political ethics and the spirit of remonstrance.

5.3. Regional dissemination and reproduction

The vitality of *A Mirror for the Emperor* is reflected in its broad diffusion and recontextualization. Liu^[41] points out that local murals in ancestral halls and academies present visual expressions that differ from the central version. Images such as the Temple Dance in Confucian temples reveal unique social functions during the localisation process. Chen^[38] indicates that local reinterpretations often align with educational practices, while Wang^[15] reveals how ritual symbols in temple murals are reinforced as public ethical goals. These studies show that images are continuously reshaped during their dissemination. Foucault's^[27] theory of "visibility" as discipline further explains how viewing itself becomes a mechanism of power infiltration, ensuring that the order of ritual is deeply internalised within multi-layered social structures.

Additionally, the natural symbols in *A Mirror for the Emperor* not only carry Confucian ethics but may also reflect reverence and respect for natural order. Yu & Luo^[11], in their study of traditional Chinese visual culture, note that natural elements in Ming ritual images, such as auspicious clouds, mythical beasts, and landscapes, are not mere decorative features but visual carriers of the concept of "harmony between heaven and humanity." Their dissemination objectively fosters a society-wide respect for nature. In the socio-political context of the Ming dynasty, where "agriculture was prioritised over commerce," images like *A Mirror for the Emperor* juxtaposed farming scenes with the Emperor's virtuous governance, indirectly conveying the cosmic view of "adapting to the natural order and making the best use of the environment". This idea resonates with traditional philosophies that emphasize harmony between humans and nature. O'Neill^[19] points out that natural symbols in traditional images can, through cultural transmission, cross historical boundaries to transmit the obligation to respect the cosmic order; Chinese Social Sciences Net^[42] further argues that the visual transmission of sustainable agricultural concepts in visual art, such as in farming images, aligns with the natural symbolism in *A Mirror for the Emperor*.

5.4. Comprehensive function and cultural significance

Overall, *A Mirror for the Emperor* demonstrates an institutionalised "visual ritual mechanism." It served a significant educational function in Ming society. The value of visual ritual images lies in transforming norms into forms that the public can perceive. From the perspective of visual culture studies, the act of viewing itself can become a path to social integration. Contemporary research further supports this, showing that shared viewing remains a critical way to share "ought-to-be." These findings suggest that *A Mirror for the Emperor* not only served a function of political admonition in the court but also constructed order and cultural identity across broader social levels through the combination of visual and practical elements.

This study not only explores *A Mirror for the Emperor* from the perspective of visual culture and ritual dissemination but also incorporates cosmological ethics and social psychology theories. By analysing the symbols and cultural dissemination functions of these images, this paper reveals how visual symbols, transcending time and space, play a role in constructing social ethics and reverence for the cosmic order. This interdisciplinary perspective provides a new framework for understanding the ethical and cosmological relations in *A Mirror for the Emperor*.

6. Conclusion

As a cultural product co-created by the court and scholar-officials during the late Ming dynasty, *A Mirror for the Emperor* holds far more value than a mere political admonition for the Emperor. Through this study, it is evident that this work reproduced Confucian "ritual" on a visual level: the composition of figures' postures, symbolic objects, spatial arrangement, and narrative structure forms a clear visual grammar, allowing abstract ethical concepts to be recognised and internalised through viewing. Ritual, thus, acquires an intermediary form that transcends text and practice, functioning as a tool for imperial discipline in the court and as a widely accessible educational resource at the societal level.

More importantly, these images do not exist in isolation; they are closely tied to the political context of the Ming dynasty. Lin^[5] has revealed the connection between the publication background of *A Mirror for the Emperor* and the political crises, while Chen^[38] discusses its role in political practice through the daily lectures system. Building on this, Bell's^[26] ritual theory helps us understand how these images, through repeated viewing, became "visualized political stages" that continuously reaffirmed ideal governance models.

The influence of *A Mirror for the Emperor* is not confined to the court. Liu^[41] shows that local reprints extended their presence in academies and ancestral halls, further illustrating how regional reproduction reflects the "central-local" interaction logic. Foucault^[27] helps explain how this mechanism penetrates social order through visibility, ensuring the enduring visibility of ritual values across different spaces.

Overall, *A Mirror for the Emperor* showcases a typical "visual ritual mechanism": it transforms abstract moral principles into observable, mimetic visual formulas and, through its dissemination across both the court and local regions, achieves dual goals of political legitimacy and social education. The revelation of this mechanism not only deepens our understanding of Ming dynasty ritual images but also provides a new interpretive framework for visual culture studies. It demonstrates that art is not just an aesthetic object, but an institutionalized medium of communication, playing a vital role in constructing social order and cultural identity.

Of course, this study has certain limitations. On the one hand, due to limitations in preserving literature and physical materials, the specific transmission paths of some image versions require further verification. On the other hand, regional comparisons still need to be supplemented with more cases, such as murals in Jiangnan academies or the reception of ritual images in Southwest minority regions. Future research could explore cross-cultural comparisons, as suggested by Sun^[43] in his study of ritual texts and visual translation, thereby deepening our overall understanding of East Asian image mechanisms. Moreover, integrating digital humanities methods^[43] could further expand the study of the contemporary dissemination and application of ritual images.

The main contributions of this study can be summarised in four aspects. First, at the level of art history research, the visual symbols in *A Mirror for the Emperor* reflect institutionalised characteristics. This study deepens this through the application of iconology and semiotic methods. Second, at the level of cultural dissemination, this study further illustrates the differentiated "central-local" interactions through case analyses. Third, at the interdisciplinary level,^[38] highlights the role of *A Mirror for the Emperor* in political lectures, while this study, drawing on^[28] perspective, demonstrates the dual role of images in legitimacy and social education. Finally, at the international dialogue level, this study emphasises the significance of visual culture in contemporary ethical dissemination and positions Chinese ritual images within this framework, responding to discussions on cross-cultural comparison and dissemination mechanisms.

By examining *A Mirror for the Emperor*'s visual mechanisms, political context, and regional dissemination pathways, this paper reveals its unique function as a visual representation of Confucian ritual culture. By integrating cosmic ethics and social psychology, this study further explores how the images in "The Illustrated History of the Emperor" convey ethical values, shape social norms, and influence the viewers' perception of the cosmic order. This interdisciplinary perspective deepens understanding of Ming dynasty ritual images and offers new insights into the study of modern visual culture and cosmological ethics.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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