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Translation of Medium: *Kesi* Meets Painting

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My current project places *kesi*, or pictorial silk tapestry, in closer proximity to the discourse of Chinese art history, and raises questions about the hierarchical categorization of creative production. Kesi was produced in China beginning in the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127 CE) as a method of weaving that allowed for designs that were independent of loom controlled patterning. When the weavers employed in imperial workshops adopted the medium, they expanded its design repertoire from overall patterning to a means of creating pictures. Indeed, a kesi artwork functioned as a painting, both visually and in its role as an art form sponsored by the imperial court. Like court paintings, the subject matter depicted in pictorial tapestry often encoded appropriate symbolism that celebrated wishes for progeny, longevity or success at the court.[1] As an auspicious picture, kesi made an ideal diplomatic gift, and served as a promotional product. As a commissioned gift for a temple or monastery, the creation of a kesi image brought merit to both the weaver and the patron. Gifts within court circles were also important, and kesi were given to please the emperor or received as a mark of his favor, and sometimes recorded important events. Many kesi were made as decorative pictures for palaces and residences, and served to connect the viewer with the cycles of nature and the ceremonial calendar, provided inspiration, invited reflection, and elevated the viewer beyond the mundane realm of existence.[2]

While without doubt particular kesi works used particular paintings as their model, or followed cartoons provided by court painters, the assertion that kesi was used to copy paintings, often repeated in the English language literature, is an over simplification. As an imperially commissioned art, we can presume that kesi would follow the stylistic and compositional canon established by the Northern Song dynasty Imperial Academy of painting. However, the medium of tapestry weaving employs distinct ways of working with forms, colors, and textures that exploit its basic characteristics. Its method represents a serious challenge for the process of translating from a medium that is not constrained by a structure, on the order of a separate language.

Characterizing kesi as a means to "copy" paintings constructs their relationship on the basis of what could be called a perceived "linguistic" equivalence, which misunderstands or misrepresents the process. Consequently, the distinct language of tapestry is not recognized, and the weaver is not seen to exercise creativity and agency, and as a result is accorded lesser artistic status. What might be called the syntax of kesi and painting are fundamentally dissimilar: whereas a painted mark may be freely applied to a surface, kesi

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[1] Angela Sheng, "Chinese Silk Tapestry: A Brief Social Historical Perspective of Its Early Development," Orientations vol. 26, no. 5 (May 1995), 74.
[2] Wen C. Fong and James C.Y. Watt, Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei, (New York and Taipei: Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Palace Museum, 1996), 336, 341.

is constructed in a woven structure that proceeds sequentially. The image is literally built up as the tapestry composition is created; thus the introduction of the technology of the loom alters the intention of the original language of painting, and the image is enunciated in a different way.

Tapestry weave is defined as a weft-faced plain-weave structure, having discontinuous wefts packed down to hide the lengthwise warp threads, resulting in a discernible ribbed texture. Requiring only a simple frame loom, tapestry is a weaver-controlled process that cannot be accomplished any other way, even today. Kesi is distinctive in its absence of structural connections between laterally adjacent sections, which results in slits along any vertical margins between design areas.[3] The level of detail that is possible to depict in a tapestry is determined by the fineness of the weave, as in order for transitions to appear smooth, more threads are required. Pictorial kesi ranged on the order of twenty-two to more than thirty-six warp threads per centimeter, more than double that of a comparably sized high quality European tapestry of the same time period.[4]

As is evident from this description, the process of tapestry is much better suited to some types of representation than others, from the standpoints of both style and intent. The slow process of weaving kesi translated courtly academy-style painting, which stressed careful depiction, more effectively and appropriately than ink paintings that emphasized spontaneity, gesture, and textured brushstrokes. Fine textured kesi allowed for delicate details, but the limitations of the technology meant that lines that ran parallel to the direction of the warp were extremely difficult to accomplish satisfactorily. Remaining true to kesi vernacular, a weaver employed its characteristic slits to read as fine vertical lines and outlines. Under the pressure of production or the demands of the design painted details were sometimes added, an example of "direct quotation."

In the genre of pictorial kesi the conventions of depiction in painting and tapestry met, and this process of translation from one to the other gave rise to a new mode of expression. Further, this encounter encouraged the development of the medium as an independent, expressive art form, separate from painting.

Tapestry fabrics had been woven as early as the seventh century in China, but in the twelfth century its utilization to create art that re-presented the conventions and function of painting was an innovative development. Writers in the Song (960-1279 CE) and Yuan (1271-1368 CE) dynasties lauded kesi for its vitality and life-likeness, and accorded it a status similar to academic painting, but by the Qing (1644-1911 CE) the tenor of commentary had changed to be more disparaging and critical. This reflected the change in aesthetic taste and theoretical position of the elite intellectuals, where the superiority of so-called amateur painting, promoted as expressing an internal process, was promulgated

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[3] Irene Emery, The Primary Structures of Fabrics: an Illustrated Classification (Washington, D.C.: The Textile Museum, 1966), 78-79.

[4] High quality European Renaissance tapestries of similar size were made with approximately ten to fifteen threads per centimeter. Pierre Verlet et al, The Book of Tapestry, translated by Edita S.A. Lausanne, (New York and Paris: The Vendome Press, 1978), 203.

over court art that supposedly only represented external appearances, relied on technical virtuosity, and was undertaken for payment.[5]

Kesi as an art form was perceived as substantially different from its prior uses as a patterning method for ritual clothing, wrappings for hand scrolls, and luxury furnishing fabrics.[6] As a means of pictorial expression in later dynasties it occupied an ambiguous and shifting position within the hierarchy of Chinese art due in part to an association with artisan labor, which moved it toward craft, and its rarity and exclusivity, which gave it elevated status. As an art form, kesi was categorized as a sub-group of painting, *hua*, in the imperial art catalogues, which were arranged hierarchically in importance of works.[7] Certainly, in the Song dynasty the meaning of *hua* was closer to "picturing," and while the definition of *hua* narrowed over time to refer only to painting, this suggests a certain fluidity, if not instability, of categories.[8]

The catalogue listings confirm that kesi, for all intents and purposes, were understood to fulfill the visual functions of painting. Both are affected by their respective technical processes and materials, and are appreciated through visual analysis, including spatial organization, perspective, and the use of colour. Both kesi and paintings have the capacity to depict "true-to-life" images in a two-dimensional form, an important aspect that in China distinguished "art" from "craft." Although woven and therefore the work of artisans, kesi nevertheless had a greater affinity with painting than craft objects.

The practice of referencing other paintings as models was not particularly unusual in Chinese art practice; copying or quotation of other works was an accepted and important means of establishing lineage, claiming authority, demonstrating intellectual prowess, and increasing status. What is more unusual is the translation of the canon across media, from painting to tapestry.

While the origins of silk tapestry in China are unclear, the wool tapestries made by the peoples of Central Asia may have influenced Song dynasty weavers. China's production of silk textiles was seldom, if ever, surpassed in terms of complex weave structures, but based on the archeological record, tapestry was not a popular technique in spite of its advantages of being a relatively simple process coupled with a capacity for flexibility in design. The tapestry fabrics of Central Asia were characterized by repeating patterns of birds and animals amongst leaves and flowers in bold, all-over or banded designs that

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[5] We must remember that the scholar-officials painted for an elite audience of highly educated, well-positioned men—in other words, themselves; furthermore, these works were written about and critiqued by these same individuals. Students at the Song dynasty academy of painting studied literature texts, including the classics, and examinations led to their categorization as artists or craftsmen. While these professional painters and artisans were well educated, few writings were left to communicate their history, feelings, or intentions toward their art.

[6] These uses continued; *kesi* works that followed painting conventions as a means of artistic expression were an addition to its use as a luxury fabric.

[7] Pictorial embroidery was also categorized this way.

[8] Craig Clunas, Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China, paperback ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 75.

were naturalistic, colorful and lively.[9] An intriguing aspect of these designs is that there was no requirement to repeat the motifs—the weaver of tapestry had the ability to alter a design at will. We must, therefore, assume that repetition played an important role: to reinforce, enhance and augment the power of the image.[10] This type of design continued to be woven in Chinese functional textiles, for uses such as sutra and hand scroll covers, luxury furnishing fabrics, and ritual and prestige clothing, including some court dress; in other words, uses where the auspicious message of the image was reinforced through concentration and repetition, characteristics of the tapestry method.[11]

Decorative designs express the aesthetic taste of their time, so that similar patterns typically appear on a variety of art forms. From the Warring States period (475-221 BCE) and likely before, a tradition existed of sharing images between media; similar designs are found on bronze vessels, painted lacquer, mirrors, metalwork, ceramics and embroidered and loom-patterned textiles.[12] Probably influenced by the prevalence and importance of academic painting in court culture, the highly skilled Song weavers began to experiment with pictorial representation in silk tapestry, adopting and adapting images and compositions from painting like any other source of inspiration.

Illustrating the shift in composition are works such as those by the renowned thirteenth century kesi artist Zhu Kerou,[13] best known for her small format "album leaf" tapestries. Her work obviously followed flower-and-bird painting conventions, yet incorporated the patterning possibilities of weaving to indicate feathers.[14] In translating the painted image the idioms of tapestry remained, and brushwork was not represented in a literal fashion. Where designs were formerly ordered as a flat pattern-filled plane, now a single figure was isolated against an "empty" ground. Technically speaking, weaving a large area of solid colour is not the "best" or most efficient use of tapestry technique. However, this background is far from merely blank; the subtle ribbed texture makes this an activated space. The album leaf format was an intimate medium, typically viewed and appreciated by a solitary individual, who lent itself well to the appreciation of the subtle three-dimensional surface of kesi; a reminder that the usual translation of kesi is "carved silk."

Concurrent with the practice of reproducing or borrowing images and compositions from paintings, weavers created pictures that synthesized the characteristic Central Asian dense patterning style for functional tapestry fabrics with the differentiated figure-ground relationship from painting. These works emphatically employed the strong colors,

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[9] Schuyler van R. Cammann, "Notes on the Origin of Chinese Kesi Tapestry," Orientations vol. 20, no. 8 (Aug. 1989): 74.
[10] Similarly, the investment of time and material to produce pictorial *kesi* strongly suggests that its creation was not undertaken lightly.
[11] See Shelagh Vainker, Chinese Silk: A Cultural History, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 128-129, 132; figures 83 and 86, for two examples.
[12] Regina Krahl, "Designs on Early Chinese Textiles," Orientations vol. 20, no. 8 (Aug. 1989): 62.
[13] A small number of *kesi* weavers are identified by name, although not much else is reliably known about them.
[14] See Masterpieces of Chinese Silk Tapestry and Embroidery in the National Palace Museum, (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1971), plates 3 and 4.

abstractions, and "filled ground" repeating motif strategies of tapestry, yet while shapes repeat they are not fixed in rigidly recurring sequences.[15]

Through this process of translation, by virtue of taking on the language of painting, the language of tapestry itself changed. Several examples of major tapestries from the seventeenth century are distinct from painting styles of the time, even while they drew on the storehouse of familiar subjects and tropes, and can only be described as fully embracing the medium of kesi, as demonstrated by the areas of flat colour, simplified forms, minimal modeling, and the use of slits for vertical elements. From this, we can infer that specialists in the medium, rather than painters, were the designers of these works.[16]

These kesi represent a new art form that was grounded in the early designs of tapestry, traced part of its lineage to painting, and yet was separate from both. Artwork created in imperial workshops at the behest of the court promoted and promulgated the state's official values and message. This extended to the use of kesi for diplomatic gifts; after all, the art form combined the beauty of one of China's most important exports—silk, considered the mark of civilization, showcased the superior skill of its weavers, and displayed the refined taste of the Chinese court. A kesi that was likely such a gift has as its auspicious subject the Turquoise Pond of Daoist paradise, where immortal beings and deities dwell, with a general message of a wish for happiness and longevity. The inscription, *Huafeng sanzhu*, ostensibly refers to the picture, but if read with a slightly different intonation, *Huafeng sanzhu*, celebrates the return of territory to China and has a meaning that resonates with the historical context of the period. The Kangxi emperor (r. 1662-1722 CE) sent gifts to Russia, including kesi, in recognition of the Treaty of Nerchinsk, which settled conflicts resulting from incursions into the Manchu homeland of the Qing rulers.[17]

Two kesi that fully embrace the challenges as well as the limitations of their technology, yet reference painting subjects promoted by the court, are *Rice Planting* and *The Hunt*, held by the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Canada (figs. 1 and 2). The size of these works, their quality and mature realization of the reformed Qing dynasty academic canon within kesi language date these works also to the Kangxi period.

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[15] See Masterpieces of Chinese Silk Tapestry, plate 5;
[16] See Vainker, Chinese Silk, 186-187, figure 119 for an example of this type of tapestry.
[17] John Vollmer, Silks for Thrones and Altars: Chinese Costumes and Textiles from the Liao throught the Qing Dynasty, (Paris: Myrna Myers, 2003), 116-117, catalogue no. 58.

Figure 1 (left). *Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Rice Planting. 235 X 135 cm, silk kesi. Qing Dynasty, mid to late 17th century. Collection of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada; used with permission.*
Figure 2 (right). *Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. The Hunt. 235 X 135 cm, silk kesi. Qing Dynasty, mid to late 17th century. Collection of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada; used with permission.*

As well as having recognized aesthetic value, kesi were intimately associated with the production and consumption of socio-political and cultural capital. Enormously costly, kesi were an understated marker of status and affluence, as from a distance, they appeared to be paintings, and a viewer had to look closely in order to see the investment of labour. This aligned their use with Confucian values, which discouraged vulgar displays of wealth, a reason why the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-1795 CE) was indirectly criticized by his officials for his enthusiastic and expensive habit of collecting of kesi.

These two works, part of a larger set, were probably either imperially or collectively commissioned, rather than made for private enjoyment. Large works that were decorative in character and pleasing in subject were often hung in the high-ceilinged palace rooms, or perhaps in the chambers of the inner quarters, where special works were hung on particular occasions during specific seasons. Those with more public messages might

have been displayed in audience halls, where high officials met with the emperor.[18] It was a common practice for local gentries to make presentations of goods of rare quality, such as these, to the emperor as a way of gaining attention. The emperor, who was anxious to display his understanding of the region and to align and identify himself with high cultural practices, likewise bestowed prestigious gifts on loyal courtiers and military officials to praise loyalty and other virtues on occasions of promotion and retirement.

An issue such as the agricultural improvements and wealth and stability of the Kangxi period are reflected in *Rice Planting*, which repeats familiar subjects such as scholars in pavilions and farming activities, and was possibly made to commemorate the emperor's Southern Tours in the late seventeenth century.[19] The setting places this scene in southern China, the cultural and economic heart of the empire, for both silk and food production. The emperor had a great interest in agricultural activities, and promoted the development of early ripening rice, which allowed for two harvests a year. Bountiful harvests were associated with peace, prosperity, social harmony, good government and patriotic pride, and were seen to confirm the Manchus' right to rule. *The Hunt* may commemorate the Kangxi emperor's northern hunting lodge, and thus his nomadic heritage. From the time of Mongol rule during the Yuan dynasty, subject matter was developed that was connected to seasonal hunting rituals of importance to court culture.[20]

Kesi as an imperial art form functioned visually as court painting and was used in many of the same ways, such as a means to connect with the natural world and to convey auspicious meaning, especially within the internal and diplomatic gifting network. The court and traditional values were promoted through the use of kesi as a visual means to bolster imperial legitimacy and create cultural capital. The medium was originally considered near equivalent to painting in importance, rather than merely as a means of reproduction, but perceptions of the status of kesi changed over time due to changes in art discourse, with a consequent loss in its prestige amongst commentators. The process of interpreting the conventions of one medium into the vernacular of another is a difficult one, yet expression in kesi was enlarged as a result of contact with painting. Placing kesi into Chinese art historical discourse challenges accepted ideas about its production, demonstrates the cultural biases of elite art theory, and expands our understanding of the entire field of Chinese cultural production.

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[18] Fong and Watt, 174.

[19] These trips were opportunities for large numbers of subjects to see the emperor, and a chance for him to bestow patronage. Craig Clunas, Art in China, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 73.

[20] Clunas, Art in China, 63. Like the southern tours, Kangxi undertook northern tours, and with his retinue lived in tents while hunting and conducting the business of government. The hunts gave locals an opportunity to come into close contact with the emperor while participating in an activity that linked the Manchus to the region. See also Evelyn S. Rawski, The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 19-22.

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