Interaction of ‘Greater’ and ‘Minor’ Cultures in Late Imperial China: Case of Popular Woodblock Prints Nianhua from the V. Alekseev’s Collection

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Abstract
The paper examines explanatory notes written by the Chinese mentors (xiansheng 先生) for the popular prints nianhua 年畫 collected by the Russian sinologist Vasily Alexeev (1881–1951) during his studies in China in 1906–1909. The studied portion of the noted is stored in the archives of the State Museum of History of Religion (Saint-Petersburg). These commentators possess higher or lower level of learning in Confucian classics and traditional literature; some of them are industry insiders with good knowledge of pictures’ meanings. The paper views their notes as a representation of ‘the greater culture’ evaluation or commenting on ‘the minor culture’ of the popular prints. Closer reading of the mentors’ notes reveals their intention to show off rudimentary knowledge of the classics, which is not always relevant to the content or questions raised by V. Alekseev.

Keywords: elite and popular culture, imperial China, Vasily Alekseev, woodblock prints, classical canons.

1. Introduction
A discussion on cultural integration in the late imperial China took place in Western academia in 1980-s. It was probably spurred by earlier anthropological studies outside China, which tended to perceive traditional societies and communities as isolated entities. For instance, Robert Redfield (1897–1958) studied Mexican communities and introduced a theory of ‘little and great traditions’. He was followed by anthropologists M. Singer and M. Marriott who conducted research in Indian villages in the 1960-s, and further elaborated the theory of ‘great’ and ‘little’ traditions. According to it, peasants and the illiterate stratum follow ‘the little tradition’, literate elites follow ‘the great tradition’ (Marriott, 1955; Singer, 1972). The volume “Popular Culture in Late Imperial China” raises the question about ‘the degree to which Ming and Ch’ing citizens shared ideas, values, assumptions’ and came to conclusion that ‘cultural integration was a particular feature in China backed by educational syllabuses, and pressures of local elites that ensured conformity’ (Johnson et al., 1985: 130). The authors of the volume also argued that China had a much higher degree of cultural integration than France in the imperial period due to ‘a much greater diffusion of literacy skills through various social groups in China’ (Johnson et al., 1985:

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E-mail addresses: katushaza@yahoo.com (E.A. Zavidovskaya), eaterioukova@mail.ru (E.A. Teryukova)
403). J. Lust mentions in his study of the popular prints, ‘as for popular culture, it enjoyed a certain independence of its own within the sphere of the national... there were the censorships and the elite values, the conformities whereby printmakers would know what could be placed in the public eye’ (Lust, 1996: 130). Recently historians and anthropologists doing research on China have initiated a new discussion of the arguments laid by James Watson about the importance of ‘orthopraxy’ (correct practice, rightness of practice) as a factor integrating elite and popular culture. Watson argues that ‘the construction of a unified culture in China depended primarily on nurturing and maintaining a system of shared rites’ rather than on shared beliefs or orthodoxy (Watson, 1993: 84). According to Michael Szonyi, ‘James Watson’s arguments about standardization and orthopraxy have proved very fruitful in exploring important questions in the history of late imperial China. According to Watson, this influence contributed to the high degree of cultural integration across classes and regions that characterized late imperial China’ (Szonyi, 2007: 47-8). Watson explicitly linked this theory of standardization with his theory on orthopraxy.

Having studied popular cults and ancestral sacrifice in the same area as Watson did, Michael Szonyi concludes that ‘claims about standardization and adherence to orthopraxy should be distinguished from substantive standardization and adherence to orthopraxy ...and that this distinction has some significant implications for the theories’ capacity to explain social and cultural integration in the Chinese history’ (Szonyi, 2007: 4). These debates affirmed the uniformity of elite and popular cultures in China, and focused on ‘how’ and ‘by what means’ this effect was achieved. Recent debates do not question the unity of the ‘grand’ and ‘small’ cultures, or ‘elite’ vs. ‘popular, mass’ culture in traditional China, but rather pose questions on interaction between cultural norms propagated from the imperial centre and local cultures, thus questioning the interaction between ‘national’ and ‘local’.

Long before these debates Russian sinologist Vasili Alekseev (1881–1951) emphasized the value of popular prints nianhua 年畫, which encompass elements of both elite culture and that of illiterate masses. He made acute observation that these prints have intricately preserved ancient culture, history, literature, legends, which were transformed into a form easily intelligible for simple people. Even though small proportion of the elite culture trickled to the grass root level; yet these elements maintained the core of collective anonymous creativity, and their study presents more challenge than things prone to quick changes under influence of fashion (Alekseev, 1958: 65). Alekseev’s interest in popular prints and religion supplanted his in-depth studies of the Chinese classics and poetry, laying ground to a systematic and wholesome approach to the Chinese culture characteristic of the Russian sinological school. This method suggested not limiting oneself to the classics and elite culture, but including prints, temple epigraphy, theatre into the scope of materials. This paper is to analyze a number of hand-written notes stored in the Museum of the History of Religion (Saint-Petersburg), which illustrate how ‘coarse pictures’ were perceived and evaluated by Alekseev’s mentors as bearers of the traditional learning.

2. Materials and methods

When did Vasili Alekseev obtain a large collection of popular woodblock prints nianhua and explanatory notes for them? He took deep interest in amulets long before coming to China. In 1902, he was assigned to systematize and describe a collection of Chinese coins from the Hermitage Museum, among which he discovered some coin shaped amulets. Later Alekseev studied collections of coins and protective amulets in London and Paris. The London’s collection of amulets was richer than the one in Paris, Alekseev checked it twice and drew sketches of these images. His interest in Chinese folklore sprang from this study. The seminal goals of his stay in China were to write a master dissertation on popular culture, supplement his existent collection of amulets and obtain reliable explanations of their meaning. These topics were quite revolutionary for the times when ‘sinology’ suggested studies of the classical canons and historical writings. Russian scholar tended to focus on those aspects of culture which were overlooked by Confucian scholars. Having arrived in China, Alekseev embarked on materials which surrounded him everywhere, he copied shop signs and various inscriptions that covered almost all the surfaces and took up purchasing the woodblock prints, since he found their motifs to be quite close to those of the amulets. Alekseev first saw popular prints exhibited in Saint-Petersburg by botanist Vladimir Komarov (1869–1945) who collected them during his expedition to Manchuria in 1896. The owner
presented Alekseev with one picture, and a young sinologist hopelessly tried to decipher its puzzles during his student years.

A diary note dated October 1, 1907, indicates that Alekseev collected seventy pieces of small size prints in Beijing and two hundred large size pieces in Tianjin. He handed them over to his language teacher Meng Xijue⁷, who assisted with their interpretation. Notes written by Meng and other teachers were bound together into six booklets with the title written in Chinese Cuhua jieshuo 粗畫解說 (Explanations of the coarse pictures). It contains explanatory notes for 433 pictures (the notes have numbers on them and correspond with numbers written on the nianhua prints). This document is kept in the State Hermitage Museum and remains understudied. In 1955–1956 Alekseev`s widow donated approximately two thousand sheets of woodblock prints to the State Hermitage, they have been fairly well studied and exhibited in Russia and abroad (Rudova, 1960; Rudova, 1961; Rudova, 1988; Pchelin, Rudova, 2008; Zang, 1995). The curator of the Hermitage collection Maria Rudova referred to these notes when compiling nianhua catalogues (Rudova, 2003). Charging from Alekseev`s diary, we assume that this set of notes explained the scope of pictures obtained by Alekseev before his expedition around North China with French sinologist and historian Édouard Chavannes (1865–1918) in May–December, 1907 (Riftin, 2009: 451).

The route of Chavannes`s expedition was the following: Beijing 北京 – Tianjin 天津 – Dezhou 德州 – Yangliuqing 杨柳青 – Taianfu 泰安府 – Jinanfu濟南府 – Qufu 曲阜 – Zouxianzdou 鄂縣 – Jiningfu 濟寧府 – Kaifeng開封 – Sishuxian泗水縣 – Zhuxianzhen朱仙鎮 – Zhengzhou鄭州 – Dengfengxian登封縣 – Luoyang 洛陽 – Longmen龍門 – Lingbaoxian靈寶縣 – Xi’an xi安 – Qianzhoubian州 – Weinanxian渭南縣 – Taiyuanfu 太原府 – Zhangjiakou 張家口 – Huaian 懷安 – Beijing 北京. Alekseev purchased woodblock prints in Yangliuqing 杨柳青, Taian 泰安, Qufu曲阜, Kaifeng 开封, Zhuxianzhen朱仙鎮, Dengfengxian登封縣, Lingbaoxian靈寶縣, Xi’an 西安, Weinanxian渭南縣, Taiyuan太原. Upon Alekseev`s return to Beijing much help with writing comments for the prints came from the professional nianhua painter Zhang Haoru⁸. In his diary dated January, February and March 1908, Alekseev mentions that Mr. Zhang Binhung wrote notes for prints numbered from 434 to 815, they were purchased during the expedition and in Beijing and included pictures with Door Gods menshen門神and `hundred-gods' baifen er百份兒 (Riftin, 2009: 458). Alekseev was not fully satisfied with the Zhang`s work, he appreciated Meng Xijue much more (Riftin, 2009: 458). In the beginning of 1909, Alekseev used his vacation to travel and purchase woodblock prints in Shanghai, Hangzhou, Suzhou and Hankou. As Alekseev`s daughter Marianna Bankovskaya mentions in her book, he worked out a list of 282 topics based on this expedition with Chavannes that needed further study and systematization, many of them were relevant to popular prints (Bankovskaya, 2010: 444).

Boris Riftin mentions total of 1452 sheets of hand-written notes, apart from the above-mentioned Hermitage booklet; another portion is housed at the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Saint-Petersburg brunch. The title of the archive entry is “Description of the Chinese popular prints featuring the works of Chinese literature. Notes of xiansheng with remarks by Alekseev. In Chinese”. This portion contains descriptions for 470 pieces of popular prints from Alekseev`s collection. They are dated 1906–1907. Riftin discussed some of these notes in his Chinese language article for the volume introducing Russian collections of nianhua, up to present there is no catalogue or a thorough study of these notes (Riftin, 2009: 458-61). What presents the main challenge is that these notes are kept separately from the pictures. Without doubt, they represent a unique case of written communication between people of two different cultures. It is a rare case of the documented interaction between a sinologist and his informants.

This paper addresses yet another scope of the notes made by xiansheng and Alekseev during his trips to China. They are resided in the Research and Historical Archive of the State Museum of

⁷ Meng Xijue 孟錫玨 (1870–1938), second name zi Yushuang 玉雙, from Wanping county 宛平縣, Tianshun prefecture順天府, north-east of Beijing, received jinshi degree in 1898. Before the establishment of the Republic in 1912 he occupied posts of an editor at Hanlin academy, a record keeper at the governor-general office of Jiangbei 江北 (present day Chongqing 重慶), a record keeper of Tianjin Pukou railroad 津浦鐵路 etc.
⁸ Zhang Haoru 張浩如 (1870 – ?), second name zi Binghan 晟漢, or Weihan 維漢. He was a painter at a shop producing prints specializing on landscapes and human figures.
the History of Religion (Saint-Petersburg), their study and matching with *nianhua* pictures is one of the goals of the joint Russian-Taiwanese project supported by the governmental funds of the two countries (2015–2017). Russian scholars who studied Alekseev’s materials on popular prints were aware of these notes, some of them were consulted by his students who edited posthumous publication of their teacher’s expedition diary (Alekseev, 1958). At the moment fourteen folders marked with the letter Д (delo case) containing total of 41 envelopes are registered as ‘Alekseev’s fund’. They feature *xiangsheng*’s comments on popular prints, temple and street epigraphy, folklore and diary notes in Russian and Chinese. Staff personnel of the museum supposes that these notes entered the Museum’s archive around 1950-s, and no one studied them since then. In 1938, Academician Alekseev was invited to work as a curator of an exhibition ‘Religions in China’, during the same year the museum purchased a collection of about 1000 pieces of woodblock prints from him. Alekseev selected exhibit items (mainly woodblock prints and photographs), proposed a plan of the exhibition and provided the exhibits with museum labels and commentaries. Probably the breaking out of the war in June, 1941, hindered this venture.

As for methodology, this study followed a principle of scientific objectivity while applying content analysis of the studied documents and comparative analysis of hand-written and pictorial sources from the funds of the State Museum of History of Religions, which brought the authors to a new level of generalizations and allowed them to introduce completely new and unstudied materials on Chinese popular arts and religions to the scholarly community.

3. Discussion

The characteristic feature of the traditional education in East Asia has been its cohesion with religion (Tibet, Mongolia) or state examination system for official posts (China, Korea, Vietnam), therefore, a person became literate as a result of learning the Confucian canon or Buddhist scriptures. The standard curriculum suggested memorizing a set of books, the level of understanding of these maxims varied among the individuals and determined whether a person was capable of participating in examinations or not. Similarly, Alekseev’s mentors possessed different level of education, e.g. Meng Xijue even received the highest *jinshi* 进士 degree and occupied official posts. Status of a ‘master’ *xiangsheng* means that they were teaching reading and writing skills, further study is required to find out whether they had passed the initial exam for *xiucai* 秀才 degree. Alekseev also consulted artists who produced woodblock designs and were ‘half literate’. We believe that finding out more details about the authors of the notes helps to determine the level of their expertise in popular prints, which were generally despised by the men of letters†.

Importantly, the notes were compiled not only by teachers, but by artisans too. After visiting woodblock prints production centre in Zhuxianzhen of Henan province and talking to a painter in one of the shops Alekseev made a very accurate observation of their role in the production of the crafts representing ‘minor’ popular culture: ‘I saw these half-literate people..., they are neither workers, nor scholars... They are the bearers of folk traditions and keepers of the Confucian traditions...This ambivalent nature of author-painters adds complexity to the pattern of popular prints which adopts plots borrowed from a thick cultural layer and inherits a long-standing tradition’ (Alekseev, 1958: 176). This observation grasps the essence of the print painters’ role of a bridge between the high-brow Confucian canon and illiterate consumers of the prints. John Lust adds that these artisans ‘were of peasant origins with a leavening of graduates of preliminary examinations, former school teachers, etc., or with a few years in a local school before being called on to support the family’ (Lust, 1996: 134). He outlines their major duties in the shop: ‘the master supplied an uncolored draft which was expected to be impeccable, hung up for discussion with the team on its quality, its likely impact and reception by the public’ (Lust, 1996: 148). Artisans were the insiders of the industry and could provide many unique details, but, as will be shown below, their ability for interpretation could in some cases be hampering.

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* In her study of the late Qing education Evelin Rawski also applies the term ‘semiliterate’ attributed to those who could not read or write beyond the elementary level (Rawski, 1979: 3).
† The problem of the prints’ misinterpretations offered by this group of consultants is discussed in (Yang, 2013).
Below we will address explanatory notes by two different commentators, discuss their approach to the images and their answers to the questions written by Alekseev in Chinese. The folder marked as ‘Д 6’ holds an envelope titled “№ 20 Album″ (menshen Door gods), below there is an addition “+ 送子娘” (songzi niang Child giving mother goddess). Total of 64 notes offering explanations for 64 prints were made by the same person, the level of calligraphy is of a satisfactory level, in rare cases there are misspellings when some character is erroneously replaced by its homonym. The majority of the notes describes the coupled pictures of Door gods which are hung on the door leaves, there are also several pictures featuring Child giving goddess and Celestial official tianguan 天官, or Door god for a single-winged door. Almost all the notes follow the same pattern and describe the attire of the gods, weapons, objects on their waist and hands, objects and slogans around the main figure. The typical description is provided below. The original punctuation of the texts is preserved:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>當四三</th>
<th>門四三</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>menshen san</td>
<td>men qí bā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>此畫五代時李存孝收伏高思繼也</td>
<td>此亦門神也</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>二人各手使抓皆穿盔甲 仍作上下二聯</td>
<td>周身穿著盔甲 背有護脖旗腰</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>此二人生前勇力過人 李存孝有打虎之事 故亦可避邪魅也</td>
<td>跨箭袋內盛羽翎箭手挐金瓜錘作左右二式也</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ci hua wu dais hi li cun xiao shou fu gao si ji ye err en ge shou shi zhua jie chuan kajia reng zuo shang xia er lian ci err en sheng qian yong li guo ren li cun xiao you da hu zhi shi gu yi ke bi xie mei ye</td>
<td>ci yi menshen ye zhou shen chuan zhe kui jia bei you hu bo qi yao kua jian dai nei sheng yu ling jian shou na jin gua chui zuo you er shi ye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question written by Alekseev: 誰打誰未詳</td>
<td>Door [God] 4 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shei da shei wei xiang</td>
<td>門[神]7-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answer: 李存孝打高思始收伏為俘耳</td>
<td>These are the Door gods too Each wears a full suit of armor on the back [there is] a flag protecting the neck across the waist there hangs a cocker full of feathered arrows a jinguachui in his hand two pictures make a pair</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This note suggests that the reader knows the story of the Five Dynasties and Ten states period wudai shiguo 五代十國 (907–979) and biographies of two warriors Li Cunxiao 李存孝 (?–894, late Tang dynasty) and Gao Siji 高思繼. The biography of Li Cunxiao was included into the ‘Old and New histories of the Five dynasties’ (jiu wudaishi舊五代史, xin wudaishi新五代史). But xiansheng probably refers to the deeds of this hero mentioned in the popular historical novel ‘Romance about the destruction of Tang and history of Five dynasties’ (Can tang wudaishi yanyi 殘唐五代史演義) complied by the Ming dynasty author who used materials from the official chronicles the ‘Book of Tang’ (Tang shu唐書), the ‘Histories of Five Dynasties” and popular legends. It depicts the fall of the Tang dynasty and warfare that followed it. Alekseev’s question reveals that he was not familiar with these two generals and the story of their struggle.

Below there is another note explaining a coupled picture of Door gods, it is an interesting case when the Alekseev’s logic made him wonder about the use and appearance of some parts of the armor, and xiansheng gives a curious answer:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>門七八</th>
<th>Door [God] 7-8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>men qí ba</td>
<td>門[神]7-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>此亦門神也 周身穿著盔甲 背有護脖旗腰</td>
<td>These are the Door gods too Each wears a full suit of armor on the back [there is] a flag protecting the neck across the waist there hangs a cocker full of feathered arrows a jinguachui in his hand two pictures make a pair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>跨箭袋內盛羽翎箭手挐金瓜錘作左右二式也</td>
<td>ci yi menshen ye zhou shen chuan zhe kui jia bei you hu bo qi yao kua jian dai nei sheng yu ling jian shou na jin gua chui zuo you er shi ye</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Alekseev’s question written in pencil: the flag can be easily torn, how can it protect the neck?

Answer: even though the flag can be easily torn, yet it can protect the neck. It is not a cloth, but a metal flagpole. In the past it could happen that [someone] used a long spear to pierce the neck. [If] there is this flagpole. A small twist. The spear of another man is caught and poked away. The flag cloth looks good. It is an excessive thing. Every commander-in-chief. Has this command flag.

Jinguachui 金瓜錘 is a cold weapon with a pike in the shape of a gold gourd. Alekseev was perplexed how a soft-flag cloth could protect the neck of a warrior. The phrase in Chinese does not give a clue, in order to understand it, one should at least be familiar with the scenic costume of an actor performing a warrior in a traditional drama, and the flags behind their back also signify the number of armies or regiments under their command. So, Alekseev raised this question to enhance his cultural competence.

A considerable number of the notes describes the weapons of the Door gods. Alekseev asks questions about their meanings, e.g. the original text says: ‘上聯門神盔甲穿龍袍身背護脖旗手托竹節鋼鞭’ (shang lian men shen kui jia chuan long pao bei hu bo qi shou tuo zhu ji gang bian). The Door god from the upper picture wears a full imperial robe on top of the armor, a flag is protecting his neck, in his palm he holds zhujie gangbian), Alekseev underlined the four characters with a pencil and asked what this thing was. His mentor wrote an answer: ‘武將上陣的兵器王靈官亦挐鞭與此皆為驅邪耳’ (wu jiang shang zhen de bing qi wang ling guan yin a bian yu ci jie wei qu xie er. This is a weapon which a general uses during warfare, the Celestial official Wang holds a whip and this thing in order to expel noxious forces) (note門 二十二三 men er shi er san ‘Door 22-23’). Zhujie gangbian竹節鋼鞭 is a cold weapon in the shape of bamboo sections, an attribute of the Door god called Jing De 敬德.

After several months of studying popular prints Alekseev had gained much knowledge and could express doubts about explanations of the xiansheng, as seen in the description below:

Alekseev’s question: this is not a picture of a Door god, it is not a warrior, what is the
We suppose that the author of the commentary probably wanted to quote the ‘Upper Scripture of Begetting Five Talismans of the Genuine Unity of the Superior and Boundless Great Dao’ (Taishang wuji dadao ziran zhen yiwu cheng fu shang jing 太上無極大道自然真一五稱符上經), better known by its short title ‘Upper Scripture of Begetting Five Talismans’ (wu chengfu shang jing 五稱符上經). It is included in the collection of the early Daoist documents ‘The Seven Tablets in a Cloudy Satchel’ (Yunqi qiquan 雲芨七簽, scroll 81, second part of the section ‘talismans and maps’ futu fu chu 影圖部二), compiled circa. 1017–1021 by Zhang Junfang 張君房). This scripture has a saying: ‘The teacher/sage wished to establish the Five emperors, had a fight with mountain demons, obtained the Map of the Five peaks then’ (zi yu ding wudi, yi shanjing, dangde wuyuetu 子欲定五帝，役山精，當得五嶽圖). So xiansheng did not name the scripture and quoted it correctly. He also quoted a poem ‘Dongting mountain’ (dongting shan 洞庭山) by Yuan dynasty poet Gao Qi (高啟1336 – 1374). What is the use of these two quotations? They seem to just have come into his mind as something relevant to the words ‘the Map of the Five peaks’, here a type of associational thinking is seen.

Commentary for another set of pictures was written by another Chinese consultant, supposedly, Tian Ziru 田子如. The calligraphy of these notes is coarser then the previous set, misspellings occur more often and many characters are written in the simplified form which points at lower educational level of the person who wrote them. This set contains in total 109 pieces of notes and a conclusion (zonglun 總論) with continuing numbering of pages, the name of the commentator Tian Ziru is placed at the end of the Conclusion. This set of notes mostly describes the Door gods and the God of wealth caishen 財神. Importantly, the very approach is different from
the previous set of notes: the author rarely describes all the objects on the picture, he puts stress on
the auspicious symbols and provides explanation of their meanings, since these meanings or
wishes are mainly not expressed verbally, but via the objects in the picture, their names sound close
to the sound of auspicious words (e.g. picture of a bat 蝠 expresses wish of happiness 福).

The way Tian Ziru wrote his notes reveal that he was rather familiar with the woodblock
printing industry, because he provided specific terms used for different compositions of gods and
their nicknames in the North and South of China. The notes also tell how to properly hang the
pictures – on the outside or inner doors, double/single-leaf doors. The typical description is below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page 16</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This also is an image of [three deities of] Happiness, Official’s salary, Longevity the southerners often use it and call it the ‘three stars with clean [not painted] faces’ for the northerners it is not appropriate to use names for the clay made figures, they are called ‘plain/white plates’ which means ‘not gorgeous’, the reason is that they are often [drawn] on coarse pictures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The author mentions specific terms used for this particular type of print depicting three
deities, which imply connections between the appearance of these deities on woodblock prints and
make-up of a Chinese drama actor, since the term ‘clean/white face’ is used for the theatrical type
without a make-up. E.g. iconography of the two most popular Door gods Qin Qiong 秦瓊 and Jing De 敬德 suggests that they have respectively ‘white face’ and ‘painted face’.

Below is an illustration of a conflict between the Alekseev’s logic and his informant’s one:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This Door god is for a single-leaf door he is also called Little Second rich man (xiao er cai) because at the bottom there is a Boy attracting wealth, the auspicious saying is: ‘attract the wealth to enter the gates of the house’, the sound of the word shen from the Door god menshen is borrowed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Remark with pencil: this boy has a beard
Better not to limit oneself with such a definition, he is called a ‘boy’, but his official post is the Immortal official giving profit in trade, [he is] also from the group of boys collecting treasures, [if we speak of] a boy looking like an old man only those who entered the society of Hongmen would find it hilarious

Remark with pencil: this boy has a beard
Better not to limit oneself with such a definition, he is called a ‘boy’, but his official post is the Immortal official giving profit in trade, [he is] also from the group of boys collecting treasures, [if we speak of] a boy looking like an old man only those who entered the society of Hongmen would find it hilarious

The logic of the xiansheng’s answer is rather curious, he does not perceive the image of a boy
collecting treasures in the same way as Alekseev does, and yet he just insists on his own
explanation. In the final phrase he makes a joke saying that all common people would not find such
an old man boy weird, except for those who ‘entered the society of Hongmen’ 入洪門, is a term for
secret societies or some illegal groups in late imperial China. The commentator probably uses this
term in a pejorative sense to delineate those who went astray from common ways.
The author of this portion of the notes likes to display literacy in the Four books and Five canons (sishu wujing 四書五經), below is a descriptive note mentioning the Analects (Lunyu 論語) attributed to Confucius:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page 32</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This is also a type of an ‘ornament on brocade’ but the ornament is different [from a picture mentioned in another note] the auspicious words are the following: ‘the phoenix sings at dawn’, ‘double happiness is constantly born’ two children hold a lotus flower and a reed pipe in their hands.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question in blue pencil: is it a propitious [omen] of great peace?

The Analects say: “The phoenix has not come ... Alas, I am finished’, The Master said, that the phoenix is a propitious bird, not easy to see, [one who] sees it begets luck since the Master did not see him [he] sighed.

The xiansheng uses the term yunjin 雲錦 (‘ornament on brocade’) for a certain composition of the woodblock print, which probably uses a contour with a cloud-like ornament. The auspicious phrase used to explain the picture ‘phoenix sings at dawn’ is also an allusion of a noble man coming to an audience of a wise ruler, the words chaoyang 朝陽 ‘at dawn’ were underlined by Alekseev, he wanted to know their meaning. I suppose xiansheng misunderstood his question and referred to the ‘phoenix’. Does this context really require quoting from the Analects? The commentator recalled a fragment from the classic relevant to the word ‘phoenix’. The final comment is just an answer to the Alekseev’s misunderstood question, it is not relevant to the description of the print per se. Below is a pair of prints commented with reference to the Book of Songs (Shijing 詩經):

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* A lotus flower 蓮 and reed pipe 笙 are homonyms of liansheng 连生 ‘constantly born’.  
† In the original text this phrase is the following: 子曰：鳳鳥不至、河不出圖、吾已矣乎 zi yue: feng niao bu zhi,he bu chu tu, wu yi yi hu. “The Master said: “The Phoenix has not come, the Yellow River has not produced at diagram. Alas, I am finished” (Chapter: Zihan 子罕).  
‡ Yang Yujun suggests that Alekeev meant the dynasty title Taiping 太平 during the Three kingdom period (256–258) (personal communication, June, 2015).
This picture is suitable to be glued on a double-leaf door; the southerners call it ‘a pair of babies’ pointing at the meaning ‘two sons are born in pair’, the auspicious phrase can also be: ‘a hoof of the kylin’s surname’ The Book of Songs, Songs of Zhou and the South ‘Happiness, nobility, will beget a son’, or one can say: ‘precious sons are born in pair’

This picture is in pair with the page 44 it is better to be glued in the room of a newlywed wife its meaning is to beget a son As auspicious words [one] can use some phrase from The Songs of Zhou and the South ‘the forehead of the kylin the lineage of a duke’, ‘precious sons are born one after another’, common folks also call it ‘the kylin brings a pair of sons’

The xiansheng again refers to the Songs of Zhou and the South, but his quotation麟定公族 is not correct, the original text is: 麟之定，振振公姓Lin zhi ding zhen zhen gong xing, the Legge’s translation is ‘the forehead of the Lin, the noble grandsons of our prince’, in A. Shtukin’s translation: ‘how noble is kylin’s forehead, now the duke has an offspring’. These quotes from Shijing are not only prone with mistakes, they are too fragmentary to understand by a person lacking training in classics, but certainly they provide enough information for the literati. In his comments Tian Ziru also mentions a chapter ‘People’s wealth’ Fumin pian 富民篇 from Guanzi 管子, and the Book of Rites Liji 禮記, chapter ‘System of ruling’ Wangzhi 王制. So, these comments represent a case when auspicious sayings popular among wide public e.g. ‘precious sons are born in pair’ are mentioned together with quotations from the more elevated cultural layer, thus illustrating the ambivalent background of the artist.

4. Conclusion

Scholar from Taiwan Yang Yu-jun, who has been doing research of the woodblock prints from the Museum of the History of Religion, argues that popular prints being a field of interaction between the higher and popular culture tend to be misinterpreted by their biased commentators, while the manner of certain pictures bears traces of the ‘literati panting’ (Yang, 2013; Yang, 2014). Our research brings to light commentary notes and elicits new facets of this interaction. As early as the beginning of the 20th century Alekseev made a correct observation about the role of the literate picture designers as intermediaries between the corpus of Confucian learning (in its basics, though) and mostly illiterate clientele purchasing the woodblock pictures. His diary notes also record difficulties he faced finding mentors who were both literate and able to write detailed commentaries for his collection of nianhua prints, since some xiansheng tended to look down at them. This paper does not focus on pictorial and verbal representations of the interaction between the elite and popular culture seen on the prints themselves, but chooses the notes to display how the commentators’ personality and background affected their descriptions. Another unique aspect

* The original text in The Book of Songs is麟之趾、振振公子, lin zhi zhi, zhen zhen gong zzi, translated by Legge as, ‘The feet of the Lin, The noble sons of our prince.’ (Chapter Lessons from the States Guofeng 国风, section The Odes of Zhou and the South Zhounan 周南), in the Russian translation by A. Shtukin: ‘the feet of the kylin are full of mercy, those are noble sons of a duke’.
† Commentary says that these phrases compare the noble appearances of the duke’s sons to the mythical animal kylin.
of these notes is a written dialogue between Alekseev and his mentors, which also reveals peculiar differences in logic and perception between the representatives of the two cultures. The paper displays how xiansheng in their commentaries reserve to both popular knowledge in the form of auspicious phrases (e.g. ‘let precious sons are born in pair’, or ‘would you receive a title of a duke upon your wish’) and the quotations (often incorrect) from the Confucian classics, Daoist scriptures and literary works.

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Взаимодействие «высокой» и «низкой» культур в позднеимперском Китае: по материалам коллекции китайских народных картин няньхуа из собрания В. Алексеева

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются письменные комментарии к китайским народным картинам няньхуа из коллекции русского синолога В.М. Алексеева (1881–1951), составленные по его заказу его китайскими помощниками-учителями (сяньшенами) во время его стажировки в Китае в 1906-1909 гг. Публикуемые в статье рукописные комментарии хранятся в фондах Государственного музея истории религии (Санкт-Петербург) и лишь недавно попали в поле исследования. Они демонстрируют большую или меньшую осведомленность комментаторов в области знания классиков конфуцианства и классической литературы, некоторые из авторов являются представителями профессионального сообщества, занятого производством няньхуа, и отражают хорошее знание ими символических значений представленных на картинах сюжетов и персонажей. В статье все комментарии рассматриваются как результат взаимодействия «высокой» и «низкой», простонародной, культур в Китае, т.е. как комментарии образованных людей, составленные на основании поводом народного искусства. Изучение этих комментариев позволило выявить элементарное, неглубокое знание классических текстов их составителей, чем объясняется не всегда корректное соответствие вопросов, задаваемых В. Алексеевым, и ответов на них.

Ключевые слова: высокая и народная культура, позднеимперский Китай, Василий Алексеев, народная картина, классические каноны.

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