Like many dramas and novels of the early modern era (1550-1919), The Story of the Stone was accompanied by wood-block illustrations when it first appeared in print in 1791. Almost immediately, though, Stone proved to be much more than an illustrated novel: during the centuries that followed, paintings, murals, peep shows, and decorative artifacts that feature the characters and scenes from Stone became part of the lived environment of Chinese men and women. Instead of being a mere textual phenomenon, Stone took on a new life through visual renditions at different levels of remove from the text. This paper explores the visual dimension of what might be called the “Stone phenomenon,” with special attention to the pictorial representations of the Grand Prospect Garden, the main setting of Stone, in a variety of visual genres and forms facilitated by the social, cultural, and technological changes in the nineteenth-century. More specifically, it highlights the irrepressible fascination with the art of illusion-making best captured in a series of murals inside the Forbidden City. The visual renditions of the Garden that proliferated during this period provide a prism for examining the trends in visual culture as well as the evolving roles they themselves have played in shaping them.

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