

*Knowledge and Text Production in an Age of Print:
China, 900-1400*

edited by Lucille Chia and Hilde De Weerd

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We know that the Chinese have printed their books for over eleven centuries, but despite such a long history of woodblock printing in China and the importance of this technology in the Chinese history of publishing, no detailed Chinese descriptions of the process of block cutting or printing are extant from before the late nineteenth century. Western observers in nineteenth-century China occasionally supplied illuminating descriptions of the cutting and printing process.¹ In his overview of woodblock printing in the *Science and Civilisation in China* series, Tsien Tsuen-hsün notes that “the technical procedures of printing have scarcely been documented in Chinese literature” and so his study had to consequently rely on interviews conducted in 1979 with craftsmen who were still producing woodblock imprints in traditional ways.² The

¹ See Walter Henry Medhurst, *China: Its State and Prospects with Special Reference to the Spread of the Gospel* (London: John Snow, 1838), 103-106; Samuel Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom: A Survey of the Geography, Government, Literature, Social Life, Arts, and History of the Chinese Empire and Its Inhabitants*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1882), 599-603; William C. Hunter, *Bits of Old China* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, and Company, 1885), 213-215.

² Tsuen-hsün Tsien, *Science and Civilisation in China*, ed. Joseph Needham, vol. 5, pt. 1, Paper

interest of Western scholars in the history of Chinese printing and books has lately been continuously growing. However, until fairly recently, scholars researching the history of books have focused overwhelmingly on the publishing boom of the late Ming (明, 1368-1644) and its impact.³ Although the bibliographic range of Song printing has been the topic of some previous studies, such as works by Ming-sun Poon, Jean-Pierre Drège, and Lucille Chia, only very limited attention has been paid to exploring the first significant phase of printing in China during the Song period (宋, 960-1276) and its long-term role in the social and intellectual history of China. In this respect, the volume under review here, the product of a conference held at the Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, Harvard University in 2007, is a major contribution to scholarship and interpretative discussion.

The contributors of the collection build upon their own research and each of the nine chapters in the volume offers a comprehensive study of a special application of print technology during the period this book covers, the “first ‘golden age’ of print in China” (1). In his essay “To Count Grains of Sand on the Ocean Floor: Changing Perceptions of Books and Learning in the Song Dynasty” which opens up the book, Ronald Egan examines the personalities of Li Qingzhao (李清照, 1084-1155), Sima Guang (司馬光, 1019-1086), and Lu You (陸游, 1125-1210) to show “how ubiquitous was the impact of the new flood of books the

and Printing (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 194-201. See also the second chapter of Lucille Chia, *Printing for Profit: The Commercial Publishers of Jianyang, Fujian (11th-17th Centuries)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002) for a profound examination of the materials and procedures of woodblock print technology, in particular as practiced by Jianyang printers from the Song period to the Ming period.

³ See among others K. T. Wu and Wu Kuang-Ch'ing, “Ming Printing and Printers,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 7, no. 3 (February 1943): 203-260; Kai-Wing Chow, *Publishing, Culture, and Power in Early Modern China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Cynthia J. Brokaw and Kai-Wing Chow, eds., *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Joseph P. McDermott, *A Social History of the Chinese Book: Books and Literati Culture in Late Imperial China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006).

period witnessed upon thinking about reading and writing” (45). In the following essay “Book Collection in Jiangxi during the Song Dynasty,” Joseph P. McDermott explores the role the book collections of Song literati played as being a basis for Confucian institutions and centers of learning. Concentrating on seventy known book collections in Jiangxi during the Song period, McDermott convincingly demonstrates that their owners gradually acquired more purchased imprints than copied manuscripts and that these collectors in Jiangxi differed from their contemporaries in the lower Yangzi delta by their interest to “build an institution around the presence of a book collection” (92). Indeed, the continuity and interrelationship between manuscript and print is also a concern in Joseph Dennis’s essay “Early Printing in China Viewed from the Perspective of Local Gazetteers,” as he deliberately discusses the permeability of manuscript and print and explains that every gazetteer was first compiled in manuscript and that the number of its imprints was often very small.

Under the title “Early Buddhist Illustrated Prints in Hangzhou,” Shih-shan Susan Huang, focusing on “a local tradition of visual printing culture” (136), traces the printing and distribution of Buddhist prints from the tenth-century Wu-Yue kingdom (吴越, 907-978) through the Song period and analyzes the spread of sutra recital as part of repentance rites producing a growing market for sales of texts. Lucille Chia, in her “The Use of Print in Early Quanzhen Daoist Texts,” forcefully demonstrates how printed texts contributed to the spread of this Daoist teaching between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, a topic rarely studied up until now. The following two essays by T. J. Hinrichs (“Governance through Medical Texts and the Role of Print”) and Hilde De Weerd (“The Cultural Logics of Map Reading: Text, Time, and Space in Printed Maps of the Song Empire”) both explore a specific aspect of printed texts as instruments of political power in China. For Hinrichs, these texts, medical manuals or historical atlases, “aimed not to assist individuals in aligning themselves with powers of the cosmos, but

to educate and transform the common people en masse” (237), or in De Weerdts’s words, they were “part of a broader cultural strategy to make sense of spatial disorder” (260). It is worthy to note that De Weerdts cogently notes that paratext, a term championed by Gérard Genette to refer to seventeenth century French imprints, shapes reading in Song China in multiple ways. She deliberately argues that even though paratextual components such as headings and running titles were used in manuscript, competition in commercial printing in the latter half of the Song period led to their normalization.

The last two essays, “Chen Jun’s Outline and Details: Printing and Politics in Thirteenth-Century Pedagogical Histories” and “Challenging Official History in the Song and Yuan Dynasties: The Record of the Three Kingdoms,” by Charles Hartman and Anne E. McLaren respectively, are more consistent in connecting the world of texts and the world of empire and political conduct. Centering around Chen Jun (陳均, 1174-1244), a disciple of Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200), Hartman lucidly surveys how Chen Jun brought together and edited his “pedagogical” histories which substitute a firm Daoxue moral narrative of Song history for the earlier chronological treatments. McLaren turns her attention to the intense interest on rewriting *Sanguozhi* (三國志, “Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms”), one of the official standard historical texts during the Song and the Yuan (元, 1271-1368).⁴ As the issue of political legitimacy became thorny again under the political and military pressure of the non-Han peoples from the north, the attempts by Song revisionist historians is specially noteworthy because “the increasing use of print led to the proliferation of historical texts, shaped their reception, interpretation, and

⁴ For a more detailed examination of the issue, see also Anne E. McLaren, “History Repackaged in the Age of Print: The ‘Sanguozhi’ and ‘Sanguo Yanyi,’” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 69, no. 2 (January 2006): 293-313; Anne E. McLaren, “Writing History, Writing Fiction: The Remaking of Cao Cao in Song Historiography,” *Monumenta Serica* 60 (May 2013): 45-69.

social status” (318).

This volume marks the collaborative effort of the contributors to “further flesh out the diversity of Song printing and book history by exploring the social and political relations that shaped the production and reproduction of printed texts, the impact of new intellectual formations on book production, the interaction between print and other media, implied readership and reading instructions, and the increase of collectors and the growth of collections resulting from the expansion of textual production” (27). In this sense, the volume adds important new dimensions to our existing knowledge of this pivotal period, and the contributing authors effectively place their book at the intersection of several subfields of history, including but not limited to cultural history, social history, and history of technology. Without doubt, this volume significantly advances the field both in terms of content and theoretical sophistication.

But as someone whose focus is further north, I can only be deeply envious. Although historians have begun to venture into the history of book and publishing under non-Chinese rule, the topic still deserves a more comprehensive examination. From the tenth century to the latter part of the fourteenth century, exactly the same time span of this volume, China was partially or wholly occupied and ruled by the Khitans, the Tanguts, the Jurchens, and the Mongols. These peoples were conventionally considered as “barbarians,” unlettered and culturally inferior, and most of them have been for a long time largely overlooked by historians. However, they formed an important chapter in Chinese history and contributed, mainly through the Chinese under their rule, toward the extension and improvement of the art of printing. In addition, the specific multi-state relations during the period also clearly shaped the intellectual attitudes toward and government policy on the production and circulation of books, because certain information about geopolitical situations or astrology might pose an intrinsic threat to the rule and legitimacy of the reigning regime if they were allowed to be distributed

freely. These topics have been touched upon in previous scholarship, yet how and to what extent such particular historical context influenced the history of the Chinese book and what long-term impact it had upon the development of print technologies and circulation network of books are still questions to which no clear answers are available.⁵ In this respect, Evelyn S. Rawski's pioneering study of printed texts in non-Han languages (Manchu, Mongolian, and Tibetan) under the Qing (清, 1644-1911) and the social and cultural effect of non-Han publishing in the Qing may serve as a paradigm for future scholarship to follow.⁶

Certainly, this should not detract from the originality and richness of this book. There is no doubt that *Knowledge and Text Production in an Age of Print: China, 900-1400* is a splendid achievement. Both scholars of Chinese cultural and social history and historians of Chinese science and technology will find skillful syntheses, intriguing observations, and provocative arguments. For a more nuanced understanding of the interrelation between readership and printing in the Song period and the historical development of Chinese printing and publishing in general, two other recent publications, Inoue Susumu's (井上進) *Chūgoku shuppan bunkashi: Shomotsu to chi no fūkei* (中国出版文化史: 書物と知の風景, A Cultural History of Chinese Publishing: Books and the Landscape of Knowledge) and Yugen Wang's *Ten Thousand Scrolls: Reading and Writing in the Poetics of Huang Tingjian and the Late Northern Song* are recommended to be read in combination.

⁵ See, for example, K. T. Wu, "Chinese Printing under Four Alien Dynasties: (916-1368 A. D.)," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 13, no. 3/4 (December 1950): 447-523; Hilde De Weerd, "What Did Su Che See in the North? Publishing Regulations, State Security, and Political Culture in Song China," *T'oung Pao*, Second Series, 92, no. 4/5 (January 2006): 466-494.

⁶ Evelyn S. Rawski, "Qing Publishing in Non-Han Languages," in *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 304-331.