

Knowledge and Text Production in an Age of Print: China, 900–1400.
 Edited by LUCILLE CHIA and HILDE DE WEERDT. Leiden: Brill, 2011.
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The essays in this conference volume analyze various ways in which knowledge was transmitted, transformed, and even effaced after print became a popular tool for transmitting knowledge in China. The editors have divided the essays into four parts. In part 1, “Change,” Ronald Egan discusses changing perceptions of books and learning in the Song dynasty, and Joseph McDermott describes book collecting and its goals in Jiangxi. Part 2 deals with “Quantification,” and has chapters by Joseph Dennis on local gazetteers, by Shih-shan Susan Huang on early Buddhist illustrated prints from Hangzhou, and by Lucille Chia on the uses of print in early Quanzhen Daoism (and hence, refreshingly, on printing in northern China). Part 3, “Choice,” contains a chapter by TJ Hinrichs on governmental medical texts, and one by Hilde De Weerd on various possible readings of a Song historical atlas. In the fourth and last part, “Control,” Charles Hartman documents a shift in three thirteenth-century political works from an annalistic documentary format (*biannian*) to a pedagogical, and partisan, commentary format (*gangmu*), and Anne McLaren investigates the vicissitudes of historical writings on the Three Kingdoms (what Hartman calls “pedagogical commentary,” McLaren names “motivated history,” a marvelous term that warrants wider adoption). Each of the chapters is valuable in its own right, but they acquire even greater value by their juxtaposition, as pointed out in the extremely valuable introduction by Lucille Chia and Hilde De Weerd, which places the papers in an overall context. The book ends with an equally valuable afterword by Ann Blair, in which this historian of Europe uses the Chinese cases presented in the book to rethink Western printing, pointing largely to commonalities. As for the chronological range of this book, Chia and De Weerd point out that the tenth century was the first golden age of Chinese printing, but that this flowering occurred only some two and a half centuries after all preconditions for print had been in place. These chapters make significant contributions in fleshing out the details of this first blossoming, even if precise quantification of the changes remains difficult.

In this review, rather than rephrasing the content of the individual chapters, I would like to touch upon some general issues that emerge from them. First, many authors stress the continuing importance of manuscripts alongside print. This point, not too long ago forcefully introduced by McDermott, risks becoming a platitude. To advance the issue, one should also ask to what extent the place of manuscripts changed after print became dominant. Could a work achieve authoritative status if it remained in manuscript only? In this context, Dennis’s observation that the printing of gazetteers was normative by the Southern Song, even though in terms of sheer numbers more gazetteers may have survived in manuscript than in print, is very suggestive.

A second theme is the question of how to deal with the loss of works. The essays treat this matter mainly as a loss of “titles,” thereby creating an unwarranted bias toward the loss of books with definite titles, while possibly neglecting

the loss of other kinds of printed material. The probable variety of ephemeral, non-book printing (money, calendars, advertisements, single-page prints, maps, gazettes, and, above all, forms) is not discussed in any detail. True, we hardly have a sufficient understanding of that material in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, let alone in the Song, but the issue deserves to be investigated. What was the influence of print on administrative forms, contracts, and records, most likely to reach the “average” Chinese? The lone chapter by Huang, with its art-historical treatment of frontispieces to one particular sutra, does not make up for this general neglect. The very term “loss,” moreover, is used in too many different senses: a book that is “lost” to a library because it is not returned after being borrowed is very different from a book that is “lost” in the sense of not being transmitted. The one thing we can say is that the opinion (McLaren’s) that scholarly works had a lower probability of survival than the more commercial items is likely too simplistic.

A third topic I would like to bring up is the nature of “editing” in China (the essays themselves use the equally imprecise term “collating”). The common lack of a precise definition of the term creates a false resemblance to European practices. Until the seventeenth century, much of the individual scholarship in Europe went into the establishment of *editiones principes*. In China, the comparable movement of *kaozhengxue* (evidential learning) flourished only beyond the time frame of this volume. By that time, in the eighteenth century, the basis of a “good” edition would almost invariably be earlier printed books, not manuscripts, whereas in earlier centuries, the main focus of “collation” was not so much to get at the exact original text, but to ensure that there were no missing parts. Usage of the vague, imprecise term “collating” hides this difference with Europe. On the other hand, from an early period onwards (Egan mentions the twelfth-century scholar Lu You), commercial firms and private scholars in China published *congshu*, collections of rare texts, a phenomenon much less common in the early centuries of printing in Europe. Are these differences important?

A fourth topic is the distinction between state censorship and mere interference. As various articles show, direct proscription was rare, even if it was carried out on occasion. Yet some authors (De Weerd, McLaren) tend to read a variety of nongovernmental (“private”) writings as inherently subversive, only to be puzzled when the government not only neglected to suppress such writings, but even co-opted them. I think it more likely that the scholarly tendency to see subversiveness everywhere is at fault, and that we should acknowledge that there apparently was much room for publishing outside the governmental center. Dennis, for example, admirably dispels the notion that gazetteers can be seen as Chinese resistance to the Mongol government.

The largest problem I encountered in these articles is the simplistic classification of printed works by terms such as “official” or “state,” “commercial” versus “private,” and (occasionally) “religious” and “family.” In some cases these are merely the English equivalents of the standard—but not necessarily useful—terms common in modern Chinese scholarship. But much confused variation occurs between chapters, and often within one and the same chapter. Thus, “private” printing may be contrasted either to “commercial” printing or to

“state” printing—and hence, in the latter case, may be equivalent to “commercial” printing. “Official” printing sometimes covers private printing by officials. It is necessary to be much clearer in specifying what we want to say when we use these terms. When we call a book an “official” imprint, do we mean that it has the authority and imprimatur of the current central government, or that its production was financed with state money, or both? Do we wish to imply that these works were widely available, or even free? The chapters in this volume often infer all these characteristics when only one is in evidence. Yet the details prove that there is hardly one, general type of “state” printing: access to some governmental works was restricted, others could be purchased (sometimes only after submission of an application), and yet other works were handed to “the market” in order to have them commercially distributed. Dennis’s discussion of the varied ways by which the compilation and publication of gazetteers were financed—including frequent private financing by officials—is very instructive: gazetteers were in no sense simply “state” publications, and neither did they enter the national market.

And then there are the officials, at various levels, who tried to publish their “private” works (whether medical ones, as discussed by Hinrichs, or histories) in order to gain fame, and who tried to get permission to present them at court as part of that strategy. The indiscriminate labeling of all these various works as examples of “governmental” or, even worse, “state” printing, and the concomitant implication that these works were in some sense canonized, creates the misleading impression that “the state” in China possessed an overwhelming influence—as indeed is evident in Ann Blair’s concluding essay. And similar considerations apply to the term “private.” We need to develop a kind of matrix with boxes for different kinds of financing (governmental financing, private funding by officials, individual financing, donations, sales, subscriptions—open or restricted), distribution (free distribution, gifts, sales—restricted or not), and other such categories, to avoid the problems connected to the imprecise terms used hitherto. Similarly, the terms “canonization,” “standardization” (also: “regularization,” “homogenization,” or “normalization”), and “authority,” which the authors all use frequently in relation to this elusive “state” printing, occur in many different meanings. There are huge differences between establishing a particular set of texts as authoritative, determining their word-for-word content, and—not mentioned in this book, but also a Song phenomenon—the standardization of the form of individual characters. None of these senses apply equally to all works that the essays characterize as “standardized” by “the state,” while some of the senses apply with equal effect to commercial or private works.

It is one of the many accomplishments of this book that such nuances can now be discussed. Thus I concur with Ann Blair’s judicious conclusion that there is no straightforward relationship between intellectual changes and the impact of printing. Critical thinking existed well before the spread of printing, while credulousness did not end after its introduction. Printing is best researched in specific cultural contexts.

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