
David Helliwell

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The invention of printing in China in the middle of the first millennium has long fascinated cultural historians, not least because of the apparent indifference to it in the country of its origin by contrast with its cataclysmic effect in Europe, to which it supposedly spread some thousand years later. For half a century after its first publication in 1925, *The Invention of Printing in China and its Spread Westward* by Thomas Francis Carter was considered the standard western work on the subject, and remained the only work until the appearance in 1983 of the small but coruscating jewel by Denis Twitchett *Printing and Publishing in Mediaeval China* (based on a talk given to the Wynkyn de Worde Society in London in 1977), followed two years later in 1985 by Tsien Tsuen-Hsuin’s compendious and not entirely satisfactory *Paper and printing* section of Needham’s *Science and Civilisation in China*. Recent decades have seen the production of many more specialised accounts and different approaches, of which Professor Barrett’s work must be considered not only one of the most original, but also the most readable.

The author sets out his stall in the introduction, where the contents of the work’s nine chapters are described. His argument in summary is that the development of printing was driven by religion at the hands of the Empress Wu, who usurped the throne for the two decades 684-705 AD. Ironically, it was the bitter memory of her reign that braked its impetus for over a century, until its widespread use was first noted on 29th December 835 in the *Old Tang history* (*jiu tangshu* 舊唐書; 17 *xia* 下), and at greater length in the encyclopaedia *Cefu yuanguí* 册府元龜 (160:5b) in connection with the printing not of religious texts, but of calendars. The dust jacket ascribes this intermission in the development of printing to the fact that its most prominent supporter was a woman, but within, this improbable assertion does not feature prominently. Rather, the interesting possibility is raised in chapter eight that it might have been due to a growing hostility to
foreigners and their religion, with which the nascent printing industry was associated.

The spread of Buddhism in the fifth century had required the production of multiple copies of short texts (or “spells”) to be produced and disseminated as relics embodying the presence of Buddha rather than as reading material. Although the technological requirements for printing were in place by the end of that century, the abundant supply of paper and the use of the brush had made it possible to satisfy demand in manuscript. But the social and religious turmoil of the following century were increasing demand to the point where some improved method of production was required. In his fourth chapter, the author introduces the intriguing notion that the sense of insecurity (the seed-corn of religion) in China at this time may have been heightened by the same cloud of volcanic ash that obscured the light of the sun for a year in 536 as noted by Procopius, one of the many fascinating cultural parallels that Professor Barrett draws in the pages of his book.

The sixth and seventh chapters are more tailored to the book’s title, and adduce a wealth of evidence, much of it new, to suggest that the Empress Wu not only perceived the potential of printing to achieve her aims, but exploited it on a grand scale; the eighth chapter continues the story of printing through the following century from what little can be gleaned from the historical record until the technology becomes widespread from the ninth century. As the author states in his introduction, “these chapters will certainly be hard going for any reader of history who expects a stream of effortless revelations”. The evidence has moved us closer to the probable reasons for the development of printing, as well as the time frame within which this development took place, but it continues to create a vacuum into which these conclusions are drawn rather than provide us with the reassuring certainty of a figure for printing comparable with Cai Lun 蔡倫 (c. 50–c. 121) for paper.

An example of such a vacuum is the fact that whilst the earliest written reference to printing does not occur until 835, the first two extant printed texts are still the dhāraṇī of the stone pagoda in Pulguksa erected in 751 in Kyongju in Korea, and the million dhāraṇī (baiwan ta tuoluoni 百万塔陀羅尼) commissioned by the Empress Shōtoku in 764 in Japan in gratitude for the suppression of a rebellion. Into this vacuum rushes the idea that it must have been the elaborate funeral obsequies for the departed empress that required vast numbers of spells to be produced, which were distributed not only throughout the empire, but far beyond it, along with the technology that produced them. If only one survived!

On this point, the author bemoans the fact that no one researching the beginnings of printing in Europe is put into his situation. Here, the tech-
nology is not only a thousand years younger, but the evidences are abundant, if not total, and have been scrutinised by hundreds of scholars over many decades. The reverse is the case in China, where the technology emerges at a time when written historical sources are few, where examples of what it produced amount to little more than scraps. Furthermore, in the west there is no community of scholars engaged in the study of Chinese printing history comparable with the community engaged in the study of their own.

All this makes Professor Barrett’s book the more remarkable for the number and variety of sources he has located, and the realisation of their relevance to his thesis. His book is an ornament to the shelf of any scholar, because unlike the work of many academics these days it is not only comprehensible, but actually enjoyable.

Regrettably, the modern practice of lumping footnotes at the back of the book with separate sequences for each chapter has been followed. In the case of a book like this, replete with new ideas of which the source is as interesting as the idea itself, the only place for a footnote is at the foot of the page, as its name would suggest. There is also no bibliography of works cited. It surprises me that university presses produce books in this way, and that authors tolerate it. Physically as well as intellectually however, the book will stand the test of time: it is printed on good paper, and has a stitched binding.