REVIEWS


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Of the two hundred years covered in this volume, the essays focus on the last century and a half (c. 1850-2008) of the period often called “modern China,” one of the most tumultuous eras in the country’s history, full of revolutionary changes that transformed Chinese culture and society. The introduction and thirteen other chapters examine how these changes were reflected in and partly stimulated by the developments in Chinese publishing and print culture, and beyond, into the digital virtual print (and non-print) medium.

As Christopher Reed’s introduction points out, we can date the modernization of Chinese print culture to the 1870s (p. 7), when Western-based print technologies, chiefly lithography and movable-type letterpress, were increasingly used by both Chinese and foreign publishers. In fact, such changes came after Chinese print culture had been dominated for twelve hundred years by woodblock printing (xylography), so the transformations from woodblock to the Internet in about one-tenth the time are undeniably stunning. One of the major themes of this volume, emphasized by nearly all the authors, is that the changes in publishing culture in the late Qing and the Republican periods were undeniably spurred by the adoption of new print technologies that allowed for faster publication of far greater press runs, but these alone certainly did not bring about the momentous political, social, and cultural changes. For instance, the increasing number of Chinese readers resulted from socioeconomic developments beginning in the late Qing and specifically from the transformation of the education system to include more men and women students. Obviously, just because more and more materials could be printed did not mean automatically mean more readers, or a higher literacy rate. All through the first half of the
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In the twentieth century, and perhaps until the 1970s, the literacy rate was not much higher than about 40% (pp. 27-29). And the explosion of readable materials on the Internet has not necessarily produced many more readers in China (or anywhere else in the world).

In fact, the first two chapters in the first section, “Modern Print Culture in Historical Perspective,” argue effectively that some characteristics associated with China’s “modernization” actually appeared even as the older printing technologies of xylography and wooden and metal movable type continued to be used.

Cynthia Brokaw’s essay shows clearly that woodblock printing (xylography), a technology developed by the late seventh-early eighth century not only survived but in some parts of China was still going strong and even dominated modern technologies into the first half of the twentieth century. Use of xylography should not be seen as a conservative or reactionary choice against modern Western-based print technologies. Although some publishers did express their aesthetic preference for older book formats by using woodblock printing; xylography was used because it was cheaper, portable, and far more simpler mechanically. Moreover, pragmatic publishers did not necessarily view the old and new printing technologies as mutually exclusive; some used woodblock printing, woodblock movable type, as well as the modern Western-introduced lithographic and letterpress printing.

True, there was a distinction between “woodblock book culture” and “modern” or “foreign book culture.” The former included works identified with “traditional” Chinese—school primers and other educational texts that had been used for centuries, practical guides to family rituals, works of traditional Chinese medicine, story collections, songbooks, etc. The latter encompassed a wide range of “non-traditional” imprints—new genres, new kinds of books and periodic publications, but also absorbed the more popular and profitable repertory of woodblock works as well as well-established distribution networks for the older traditional imprints.

Ellen Widmer’s essay points out that the early “modernization” of Chinese book culture was already happening in the first half of the nineteenth century without mechanization (i.e. use of Western-based print technologies), as characterized by four developments in the publication of fiction. These were the significantly greater number of titles; noticeable changes in the geographic distribution of imprints—an “empire-wide publishing process” but based in large book centers such Suzhou and Guangzhou; international awareness by Chinese writers, influenced to some degree by Western missionaries’ own publications; and changing composition of readership (including growing numbers of women readers). It was not so much each of these individual trends but the unprecedented combination thereof that marks the modernization that Widmer describes. The reasons
adduced for this early modernization, such as lessening state censorship as well as greater reader demand are unobjectionable but also leaves the reader wanting further explanation and the essay inspires further work (e.g., some idea of print runs for titles, including reprints (i.e., from the same blocks), as well as more data needed on how slackening of censorship allowed publishers to produced (previously) prohibited works.

In the second section of the volume, “New Technologies and the Transition to Modern Print Culture,” we begin to consider the Western-influenced modernization of Chinese publishing, about which it would be impossible to discuss the topic without mentioning the early activities of the Christian missionaries. Researchers’ focus, however, has been primarily on the work of Protestant missionaries, such as those of the London Missionary Society, the earliest organization to use letterpress printing in China. Scholars have paid far less attention to Catholic missionary publishing, because of both the fewer works produced and the relative scarcity of extant sources. Johannes Kurz’s chapter redresses some of this neglect, and looks at the Jesuits’ Imprimerie de T’ou-sè-wè (Tushanwan yinsluguang 土山灣印書館) at Jesuit headquarters in Zikawei (Xujiahui 徐家匯) near Shanghai, in operation from 1864-1930. The press’ pioneering efforts in included lithographic and colotype imprints. Indeed, when Ernest Major decided to launch the Dianshizhai Pictorial (Dianshizhai huabao 點石齋畫報), a supplement to the Shanghai Journal (Shenbao 申報), the lithographic printer came from the Jesuit press. Kurz focuses on the Chinese Jesuit Li Wenyu 李問漁 (1840-1911), one of the most prolific author, editor, and publisher of this press. Li’s linguistic and literary skills enabled him to produce works that ranged from the more learned articles in the press’s newspaper, “I-wen-loi 益聞錄 to the “flat and shallow” writings in the Messager du Sacré-Coeur (Shengxin bao 聖心報) aimed at readers with an elementary school education. What is interesting is the curious echo of Buddhist printing for merit. For instance, Li Wenyu in 1889, using the Shengxin bao enlisted names of nine thousand heads of households from Jiangnan for the consecration of the Basilica of Sacré-Coeur in Paris; in 1892: call of assistance for the benefit of children educated in local Christian schools; in 1898, secured subscriptions to finance exquisitely embroidered banners for a new chapel.

Andrea Janku’s chapter on the “Uses of Genres in the Chinese Press” talks specifically about new ways of presenting both facts and opinions in newspapers and periodicals, to which many more readers were exposed as a result of the more powerful and faster ways of printing. For instance, displacing the older editorials written in a solemn and authoritative style, short critiques or editorial comments were offered, different in style, emphasis, and formatting, including more obvious punctuation. Many other new genres were introduced: “pure talk” (qingtan 清談), miscellaneous critiques” (zaping 雜評), “idle critiques” (xianping 閒評), readers’ contribu-
The plethora of these genres and their combined presentation in periodic publications rather than their names, many of which had existed in premodern Chinese literature, that made them part of the modern publishing and provided cues to the way their readers responded to politics and culture.

Paize Keulemans, in “Printing the Sound of Cosmopolitan Beijing” discusses how regional dialects were conveyed in print, particularly in novels in the late nineteenth century. While this practice was not new in the late Qing, the paratextual techniques, such as “double printing” to record both the standard and regional dialect pronunciations of words represented a kind of experiment found in both imprints of novels and serialized novels in newspapers. Moreover, long-honored traditional narrative devices used in oral storytelling, such as keeping the newspaper reader in suspense until the next day were employed. Keulemans argues, however, that in the case of an author like Cai Youmei’s recording the speech of old Beijing, it was meant to “recall a disappearing world” for a national audience rather than to perform a theatrical function. Clearly, the new printing technologies and the new forms of publication that emerged in the late Qing meant old wine poured into new bottles would be transformed.

Another kind of publishing with perhaps the longest printing history in China—that of Buddhist works—also shared with secular works many of the same developments. For some devotees, Buddhist publishing and revival of Buddhism in the late Qing and Republican periods was as a Chinese countermeasure to Christianity and Western culture in general, a reversal of the original notion of Buddhism as a foreign religion when it first entered China and somewhat later, in the age of woodblock printing, as a sinifying development of Buddhism (a Chinese textualizing of the religion). For others, embracing a modern Buddhism meant adopting modern mechanized ways of printing scriptures, morality books, scholarly texts, reference works, journals, devotional booklets, as well as reproductions of the Tripitaka. While traditional printing establishments continued, including those in some monasteries and traditional printshops, these were superseded by newer publishers like the prestigious Jinling Scripture Carving House (金陵刻經處) that produced xylographic imprints to publishing houses founded by Buddhist societies to commercial presses that understood the huge market for religious works. As Kiely points out, the latter two kinds of publishers also were involved in the printing revolution and appreciated how lithography, letterpress, and photomechanical printing enabled them to disseminate many more copies more rapidly than woodblock imprints. Using such modern mechanized printing technologies meant that Buddhist publishing increasingly concentrated in large urban centers where publishers could afford the necessary
machinery, and where the educated elite involved in propagating Buddhism were located.

In the third section of the volume, “The Golden Age of Print Capitalism,” the first two essays look at the dynamic developments in publishing culture in Shanghai and the surrounding Jiangnan areas, while the third essay traces the development of “print communism” that had its birth under the shadows of Shanghai’s print capitalism.

One distinctive development amid the explosion of publishing in Shanghai were the small presses involved in New Culture publishing, especially in the 1920s, as described by Ling Shiao. It is here that we find the new printing technologies applied to new literary and political developments associated with the May Fourth Movement and later. As Shiao points out, these twenty-six or so small presses found on or around Fourth Street (Sima lu 四马路) in Shanghai were vibrantly aware of their status as the vanguard of what was new, modern and radical in Chinese society, appealing in particular to the younger generation of men and women readers and succeeding in popularizing May Fourth-inspired authors. As Shiao points out, these newly famous authors then attracted the attention of the far larger commercial presses with their far greater resources, so that the small avant-garde presses lost out and mostly disappeared by the 1930s, but the writers became more professional authors whose readership expanded from a limited audience of intellectual peers to a far larger mass readership because of the commercial presses’ extensive distribution networks.

If we move away from the powerful print capitalists of Shanghai but still remain in the surrounding lower Yangzi region, we see a different pattern in publishing, as mechanized print technologies became cheaper and thus more available in smaller cities and towns. Specifically, Robert Culp looks at the education world—teachers, students, administrators, government officials, and supportive groups (alumni, donors, etc.) who benefited from the growing availability of mechanized presses, that led not only to providing a growing readership with many more books and periodic publications (of which the Zhejiang qingnian 浙江青年 was one notable example out of over 1,400 journals) but stimulated the readers to be authors, editors, and publishers as well, unifying them into a community involved in speaking and listening to each other.

The most obvious example of the vital link between politics and publishing in twentieth-century China is described in Reed’s chapter on the Chinese Communist Party’s experiences with disseminating their ideas, in leaflets, books, journals, and newspapers. Reed covers the pre-1949 period, which divides clearly into two major parts. From 1921 to 1927, when the CCP’s publishing activities were located predominantly in Shanghai, where the Party and its sympathizers operated under the shadow of the
commercial print capitalists and where the Party exerted incomplete control over what was printed, even if the Communist publishers had the technological printing resources of Shanghai. In contrast, after the purge of 1927, during the Jiangxi Soviet period or on the Long March, printing of newspapers, books, and even paper money, even with far more primitive equipment, came far more under the CCP’s direct control. This situation continued into the Yan’an Decade (1937-1947), when Reed’s “print communism” developed, with the CCP in direct control of writing, printing, and distribution. Given the primitive conditions of northwestern China, Reed argues that use of woodblocks, lithographic presses, and relief presses to print out books, journals, newspapers, often on mediocre local paper from bamboo or grass made a virtue of the austere conditions, and not only industrialized the primitive area around Yan’an but also reversed the balance of availability of print materials, at least temporarily favoring this rural area.

What is missing is the very different story after 1949, when we arrive at the stage of print under a Communist state. Did the volume’s editors feel that this period is less interesting or did publishing and print culture reach a kind of stasis because the CCP finally could “assert an unprecedented level of hegemony over China’s print culture?” Perhaps, but even so, it may be worth examining how China’s political history affected or was reflected in its publishing history during the second half of the twentieth century, even before the advent of the Internet.

Very few users of today’s cybertechnology underestimate the changes it has wrought in communication. Indeed, it is far more likely that our inability to gain a sufficiently distant historical perspective has led us to overestimate or exaggerate the nature of the changes. Nevertheless, the virtual print world that we have plunged into continues to have many connections to the older world of print publishing. As Daria Berg’s essay on three Chinese women authors noted for their “body-writing,” i.e., “a narrative genre that emphasizes sensuality, sensitivity, and focus of private experience” (pp. 316-317), the popularity of two of these writers in print (and enhanced by censorship) fostered their popularity online while the popularity of the third author’s writings, originally released in the Internet, attracted publishers who then printed her works. This cross-fertilization of print and digital media is also explored in Guobin Yang’s essay, which also points out that the notion of who is an “author” becomes broader and more fluid in cyberspace.

In other ways the Internet may be effecting momentous changes in the text culture of China and other countries. For example, a recent (July 2014) estimate claims there are some 632 million Chinese “netizens,” who constitute some 46% of the country’s population—an impressive increase from the figure of 298 million in 2008 cited by Yang Guobin (p. 350). Some
related figures are thought-provoking: 28.2% of the Internet users are rural residents; the number of microblogs and social networking users have declined since 2013, while the users paying bills online or playing video game players have increased. The centralized infrastructure of modern Chinese publishing that began with the overwhelming dominance of Shanghai in the late nineteenth century and transmogrified under the Communist state has disappeared with digital publishing, but is publishing of texts also diminishing as we enter a post-literate era? Perhaps a future volume may not be devoted to the death of book culture and publishing, but at least its significant diminution in a post-literate era.

As valuable as the wide variety of topics covered by the thoughtful essays in this ambitious volume are the topics for further research suggested by the different authors. For example, how do we connect the tremendous changes in publishing and print culture in China with those in the wider Sinophone world, specifically in Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. Some of these, such as Singapore and Manila, had also developed their own publishing institutions as well as regional readerships that took in both local imprints and those that came from China. On a very different topic of texts and images produced and disseminated in cyberspace, the authors of the last three chapters in the volume would certainly readily admit to the exploding literature on this subject. Nearly daily news items appear on the uses, legal and illegal, of digital media by individuals, private groups, and government agencies that could be the basis on many more studies that would, among other topics, extend those explored in this volume—for instance, huge growth of electronic resources for Buddhist studies, including the digitization of the Buddhist canon. While individual studies on such topics have been increasing, both in print and online, this volume demonstrates the value of bringing together many studies to stimulate the reader into reconsidering the nature of profound changes to a society and culture so long impressed by texts and images.