The 64th Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs
Presidential Panel Notes on *Print Culture in East Asia* (Part II)

Experience of Print in Everyday Life in Imperial China

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My talk is based on the key idea of a conference on the history of "non-book publishing" that I organized in 2014 at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.[1] As Professor Hegel has noted, recent scholarship have made impressive contributions in advancing our knowledge of the history of publishing in Imperial China. These studies, however, almost exclusively focus on books. In what follows, I will suggest and explain why it is fruitful and necessary to expand our scrutiny beyond books to all varieties of texts and images produced by print technologies in imperial China.

Non-book Prints and the History of Printing in Imperial China

Historical studies of printing in China have been dominated by two lines of inquiry: book history and communications technology. Even the recent bourgeoning of scholarship on reading practices and visual culture has not significantly changed the focus on printed books. Works on visual culture intersect with the history of printing and may include non-book prints but they are disposed toward viewing images and issues of the visual. There is remarkably inadequate attention given to the application of print technology in practices of everyday life—from commerce, politics, government, family, ritual, religion, language, to news and communications (except modern newspapers). There are numerous kinds

[1] Co-organized with Charles Wright, "An International Conference on History of Non-book Publishing in China, Tang (618-907) through Qing (1644-1911)," University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, September 26-27, 2014.

of printed materials, both text and images that had become essential materials in the daily life of the Chinese in the imperial period. For the sake of simplicity, these printed matters are here referred to as "non-book" prints, which overlap principally in terms of reference with "printed ephemera."[2] It is not that these materials would not end up as part of a book, but these prints did not originate in book form and were not used as books.

History of the book privileges text and literacy, reading over viewing, as well as communication over utility.[3] Reading, however, is only one of many perspectives from which print culture can be examined. A book-centered approach to print culture inevitably directs attention to the literary population and the impact of printing on the dissemination of knowledge and ideas. The limitations of this bibliographic approach to the history of print culture are many, including the following three important aspects. First, for early periods since the invention of printing when books were expensive and not widely circulated, the impact of printing on the general population, especially the poor, would likely be neglected, and those non-literary uses of print would be overlooked. Second, preoccupation with books has spared little interest in examining how printing impacted governance. Hardly any studies explore how printing

[2] "Ephemera" in general does not include prints from steles, which are an important type of non-book prints in imperial China. See Kai-wing Chow, "Printing from Stone: Steles, Law, and Public Culture in Qing China," and Steven Miles, "Powerful Displays: Cantonese Merchants, State Agents, and Public Inscriptions in the West River Basin, 1720-1901." Both papers were presented at the aforementioned conference.

[3] There are some works examining visual images in printed books. But they are still primarily studies of book culture. For example, see Robert E. Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Julia K. Murray, *Mirror of Morality: Chinese Narrative Illustrations and Confucian Ideology* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007); Anne Burkus-Chasson, *Through a Forest of Chancellors: Fugitive Histories in Liu Yuan's Linyan ge, an Illustrated Book from Seventeenth-Century Suzhou* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2010); He Yuming, *Home and the World: Editing the "Glorious Ming" in Woodblock-Printed Books of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013).

facilitated the imperial state in governing its immense population.[4] Third, bibliographic approach to print culture has obscured the impact of printing on daily practices that did not involve communication, education, and knowledge diffusion.

In the following, I will offer a brief discussion of several types of non-book prints in imperial China, and raise a few questions to suggest why they are important and need to be studied if we are to gain a broader understanding of the impact of printing on Chinese society in the imperial period. My focus will be on the experience of print in several important aspects of everyday life in imperial China: religion, economics, government, and entertainment.

Religion and Economics

Religion was a major agent in promoting the use of print technology in its fledgling phase of development in China as well as in Europe. In the Tang period (618-907) after printing was invented, the most common printed products people—literate or illiterate—came into contact with were not books but single Buddhist prints. The earliest extant Buddhist prints were copies of the *dhāraṇī* sutra or *Tuolouni jing chou* 陀罗尼经咒.[5] Printed in both Sanskrit and Chinese, these copies of the *dhāraṇī* sutra were believed to have the power of protection against sin, malady, and other evils.[6] The printed sutra offered its carrier protection from harm and sin, which was one of the most important meanings of Buddhism that most people came to comprehend and embrace. The portable and inexpensive product offered the Buddhist clergy a new

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[4] There are some preliminary attempts to address this question. See Zhaohui He, "To Improve Efficiency: Printed Matters in Administrative Affairs in the Ming Dynasty," and Ting Zhang, "Magistrates' Proclamations (*gaoshi*): Printing, Law, and the Circulation of Government Information in Qing Society." Both papers were presented at the aforementioned conference.

[5] *Mahapratisara* is a Bodhisattva.

[6]The earliest extant print was the *dhāraṇī* sutra 无垢净光大陀罗尼经 discovered in Gwangju (庆州), Korea in 1966.

material means to reach out to the masses, enabling the poor to patronize the religion with the purchase of a print, not an exorbitant donation for colossal devotional objects such as sculptures, paintings, or architectural projects. A printed *dhāraṇī* substituted the voice of a monk and was marketed as an embodiment of the magical power of a Buddhist deity. The immense quantity of Buddhist images and scriptures like the *dhāraṇī* increased the demand for paper and hence facilitated the expansion of paper production, which in turn sustained the nascent printing industry.

Printing not only enabled Buddhists to produce religious prints for sale to devotees and for missionary work, but also helped the Song (960-1279) government exert greater control over the Buddhist population and to benefit financially from such a control by selling certificates of tonsure (*dudie* 度牒). Following the practice of the Tang, the Song government required monks and nuns to obtain certificates of tonsure in order to limit the size of the Buddhist and Daoist clergy. Beginning in the late Tang, the government resorted to selling tonsure certificates to augment its revenue. The practice later became a regular solution to government financial exigency. The Song government issued printed certificates annually, and the number ranged from 3,000 to 10,000. These certificates were sold not only to the Buddhist clergy but also to the general public. They were used later by the government as "bonds" to raise money. They had become in effect a form of medium of exchange not unlike modern bonds with fluctuating prices and a market. For example, the famous poet Su Shi, on several occasions, petitioned the emperor to grant tonsure certificates in order to pay for public work and charitable projects. Tonsure certificates did function as medium exchange widely accepted by merchants.[7] The Song government found it convenient to sell certificates when it became deficient in revenues for its military and disaster relief funds. I suggest that these printed certificates would have offered additional practical experience, and hence confidence in using paper medium for monetary transactions. They facilitated the adoption and spread of printed currency

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[7] See Su Shi 苏轼, *Collected Works of Su Shi* (*Su Shi ji* 苏轼集), *juan* 56, 57,61, 64, 65, 76, 82, and 115.

for economic transactions. The comprehensive impact of the extensive use of tonsure certificates on the economic and social life of Song China awaits further investigation.

Daily Experience of Print during the Qing

Fast-forwarding to Qing China (1644-1911), we find that printing had become an integral technology of everyday life as it was employed extensively by the imperial state and diverse groups across the social spectrum. In Qing China, before the introduction of European methods of printing, encounters with printed material was a daily experience for the general population. Large quantities of prints were produced to meet various needs by the government and the public.

First, the use of print had become indispensable in the operation of the imperial state by the Qing period. Major aspects of administration—fiscal, economic, educational, judicial, and military—involved extensive use of printed documents and forms. Offices in the central bureaucracy and all levels of local government produced and issued large quantities of printed documents and forms: household registration forms, property deeds, licenses for shops, ships and mine operations, litigation forms, tax notices and receipts, transportation permits as well as public notices, to name a few. Officials, students, merchants, brokers, and even eunuchs were issued identification documents.[8] Students eligible to take the civil service examinations were issued special documents for identity verification at the examinations.[9]

A society with little geographical and social mobility would have no need for identifying its members. Only when movement of people increased in number and frequency within a large geographical area would it arouse concern for security and control from the government's

[8] See the various entries in *juan* 8, 10, 11, 12, 17, and 19 in *Statutes by Categories* (*Dingli leichao* 定例类钞) published in 1733 by the Judicial Commissioner's Office of Guangdong (Guangdong anchashi yamen 广东按察使衙门) which is available at Beijing National Library.

[9] *Statutes by Categories* (*Dingli leichao* 定例类钞), *juan 17*.

perspective. Successful and effective management of an increasingly mobile population, in both geographical and social terms, requires a capacity and material devices to identify and track their movement. The Qing state required its subjects, from the privileged Manchu Bannermen to deprived groups, to carry identification. In the eighteenth century, with dramatic population growth and growing scarcity in resources, the economic conditions of the Bannermen continued to deteriorate. Han Bannermen who decided to leave the barracks and become ordinary subjects would be issued an official identification document by local officials.[10] To relieve population pressure, the Qing government encouraged the "shack" people (*pengmin* 棚民) to resettle and reclaim land. Those leaving to resettle in response to government initiatives were required to obtain and carry printed and authorized certificates (*yinpiao* 印票) issued by the local government where their households were originally registered.[11] The land that they would be legally allowed to work on also needed to be registered with the government and a printed permit would be issued to them.[12]

Prints produced for commercial and private purposes were widely circulated in the Qing. Printed receipts and banknotes issued by pawnshops and bankers, door god prints, playing cards, and gambling tickets were commonly encountered in everyday life in Qing China. Prints were used to advertise commodities such as tea, books, silk cloth, and medicine. Medicinal remedies for common sickness and diseases were printed by officials as well as religious and charitable associations. For example, one extant religious print promises to provide magical power to facilitate child birth.[13]

[10] *Compendium of Statutes* (*Dingli huibian* 定例彙编) 1770, *juan* 9.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] One extant copy was produced in Beijing by three persons who underwrote the cost of printing. It ended with an exhortation for reprinting and circulating the sheet for religious merits (翻刻广传功德无量).

In the nineteenth century, gambling merchants in Guangdong were very successful at selling lottery games using printed tickets. One type of lottery was called "white pigeon tickets" (*baigepiao* 白鴿票).[14] This game had two common formats. The first format listed a large number of surnames of candidates at the civil service examinations, and the gambler picked the names of those who would pass the examination. The second format listed the first eighty characters of the *Thousand Characters Text* (*Qianzi wen* 千字文) from which the gambler chose the winning characters. Interestingly, with door to door service to distribute tickets, collect bets, and dispense prizes, women at home became eager participants in these public lotteries.

Questions for Further Research on Non-book Prints

In view of the brief discussion above, we may raise some questions with regard to the impact of non-book prints in imperial China. How did printing facilitate the administration of the immense Chinese population since the Song era? Did printing contribute to injecting consciousness and experience of the state into everyday life below the county which was the lowest level of the formal apparatus of the imperial state? Did printed text such as contracts, receipts, and advertisements contribute to the development of trust among merchants and consumers? To what extent did printed texts and images contribute to commercial development by reducing disputes among businessmen? Did prints such as playing cards and lottery tickets in any way help the players learn to become part of a larger cultural community by acquiring a functional literacy, a common historical vocabulary, or other cultural components, through which they were able to construct various ethnic identities that became part of more inclusive identities? By filling printed lottery tickets, women in Guangdong could participate in public gambling without leaving their homes. Did these women reaching beyond their homes to participate in an otherwise predominantly male world nonetheless attest to the gendered

[14] See En Li's excellent dissertation, "Betting on Empire: A Socio-Cultural History of Gambling in Late-Qing China" (PhD diss., Washington University in Saint Louis, 2015).

practice of gambling in Qing China? Did playing the games day after day eventually enable the player to acquire some familiarity with and some rudimentary knowledge of the Chinese scripts? Non-book prints like copies of steles were preserved in such book form as the local gazetteer or genealogy. Texts and forms printed in books could be reproduced by local officials as single prints for wider circulation. The transmission of texts and images between books and single prints has enabled the preservation of copies and even facsimiles of prints that no longer exist. I suggest that the study of non-book print culture will broaden our understanding of the impact of printing on everyday life in imperial China. And, by the same token, it may be equally beneficial to examine the non-book print cultures of Japan and Korea prior to the introduction of European methods of printing.[15]

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[15] A wide range of single prints produced in the Edo period, such as calendars, ranking list (*banzuke* 番付), news sheets (*kawara ban* 瓦版), and directories of Bakufu officials (*bukan* 武鑑), is a case in point. Peter Kornicki has remarked that "[a]s yet very little work has been done to reveal the extent or nature of printed ephemera during the Tokugawa period." See Kornicki, *The Book in Japan: A Cultural History from the Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 60-73, especially 72.