

Publishing, Culture, and Power in Early Modern China. *By Kai-Wing Chow*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. xv + 397 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, appendix, tables. Cloth, \$49.50. ISBN: 0-804-73367-8.

Reviewed by Barbara Mittler

The impact, or nonimpact, of a technology does not depend exclusively on what it can do alone. The specific impact of printing—a technology of multiplying texts—cannot be understood if we consider only the technological advantage of printing in communication. It is not printing itself that determines how it will be used, but rather the specific attitudes of the group who come to use that technology as well as the ecological, economic, social, and political conditions under which a specific technology is developed, introduced, marketed, used, and resisted. These various factors also shaped the symbolic production of the technology itself. (Kai-Wing Chow, pp. 252–3)

Whoever buys this study of “early modern China” on the assumption that its title refers to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries will quickly discover that its subject is, instead, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nevertheless, the reader might be surprised to find in the discussion much that is familiar, as this is, in reality, a book that has a lot to say about modern China. With the arrival of this book, it will be necessary to revise much of what was once considered particular to Chinese (print) modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The subject, considered in five chapters, is the development of print capitalism and its influence on literary culture in late Ming China. Each chapter takes a different angle. Chapter One, which covers material matters, such as the cost of production in the printing business, makes the argument that published products were affordable for a sizable part of China’s population. Chapter Two, which deals with technical aspects of the printing business, explains why woodblock printing continued to appeal to Chinese publishers, despite the emergence of movable type. Chapter Three discusses social aspects of the printing business, arguing that the elusive quest for examination success created a need for alternative or temporary careers, often in publishing. Chapter Four describes the intellectual side of the publishing boom, observing that the approach to the

Confucian canon in textbooks for the examinations was becoming increasingly “pluralistic.” Chapter Five traces the growing ideological clout of commercial publications and concludes that authors and publishers gained a degree of literary authority that eventually undermined the dominance of the civil-service examiners. Thus, in spite of the official insistence on one politically correct reading of the classics based on the commentaries of the Zhu-Cheng neo-Confucian school, late Ming China had many more readings to offer, and these were available to a sizable public. Already by the early years of the seventeenth century, then, production of meaning was no longer solely the privilege of the state.

Publishing, Culture, and Power in Early Modern China is based on a rich selection of primary sources, both historical and fictional. It abounds with exemplary material, and the appendices in particular, which offer data on book prices, for example, are a gold mine. There is much for business historians to sink their teeth into, such as the precise calculations of the costs of book production vis-à-vis the income of different strata of the population (ch. 1); an “economics of technology,” which explains the continued preference for xylography over movable type (ch. 2); and deliberations on the rising social (and political) status of the print merchant in a society that had a cultural abhorrence of making profit (chs. 3–5). The book shows with admirable clarity the close intertwining of relations between scholars and merchants in early modern China (so much so that their names were joined, and they became known as scholar-merchants [*shishang*]). The description of how these print capitalists chose their profession reveals a “two-track career structure” (p. 147) that parallels many a literati career path in late nineteenth century China when journalism became a haven for stranded examinees (see Natascha Vittinghoff, *Die Anfänge des Journalismus in China (1860–1911)*, 2002).

The author points out critical variations from the evolution of European printing. As occurred in Europe, printing in China triggered profound changes in communication and cultural production. But, in China, xylography and movable-type printing do not fit into a dichotomized pattern of “primitive art” and “modern technology,” respectively. Indeed, both woodblock printing and movable type together served for a long time as modern technology. In China printing fulfilled different functions and, accordingly, produced a pattern of change that diverged from the developmental path followed by

European print inventions. The availability of cheap paper in China made it possible to print products that catered increasingly to popular tastes. Nevertheless, despite the abundance of inexpensive publications, the vernacular did not come into universal usage in print, as happened in Europe. On the other hand, the Chinese did not impose the kind of government censorship that Europeans resorted to at this time, nor did the Chinese require licensing, with the result that, inevitably, a more diversified range of writings began to emerge. These findings run contrary to the commonly accepted notion that print culture in imperial China was a prerogative of the elites and that the government imposed extreme regimentation on its polity. Another common assumption is that the Chinese state maintained hegemony through its the examination system and controlled (and thus stifled) the creative minds of its citizens. Chow's findings undermine these assumptions by demonstrating that widely disseminated public challenges in print to the legitimate (state) language have a long history in China, a point that has been discussed in detail recently in conjunction with the upcoming release of a number of late-nineteenth-century "modern" Chinese-language publications (see Andrea Janku, *Nur leere Reden: Das Genre 'Leitartikel' in der chinesisch-sprachigen Tagespresse Shanghai (1884–1907)*, 2003).

Chow's book is well conceived, although she is at times too polemical in attacking what she calls a "sinologistic mode of history writing," which she condemns for its reliance on the theories of "outsiders." However, she herself uses these "foreign" theories to good purpose, beginning with Pierre Bourdieu and continuing with Michel de Certeau, Roger Chartier, Gerald Genette, and Jürgen Habermas, to mention just a few. One could wish that the editing of this book had been less sloppy, as there is considerable repetition and several instances of circular logic (especially in the introduction, the weakest part of the book), as well as grammar and pinyin errors and missing titles in the bibliography. At certain points the chronology is clear; in other places the reader has no signposts and may have trouble following the sequence of events. Another annoyance is that the glossary is not placed at the back of the book, making it difficult to find. A more helpful approach for the reader would have been to insert the characters directly into the text.

This is an important book, and not only because it challenges recent discussions on the origins and developments of “modern China.” Its conclusion, with comparisons between China and Europe, is masterly. Each proposition made throughout the book is brought to a short and satisfactory end. I look forward to the appearance of Chow’s more detailed exposition of the “literary public sphere” and the alternative culture created by the *shishang* in her next volume, *Printing and Shishang Culture*, scheduled to be published soon.

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