

Printed as Handwritten: The Importance of Calligraphy in Printing in Late Ming China

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1 INTRODUCTION¹

The Chinese have printed their text in the form of books for more than eleven centuries. During the seventh or eighth century, at the latest, the Chinese invented xylography to reproduce text by cutting written characters on woodblocks². Although the method was originally utilised for religious purposes, in

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²Timothy H. Barrett (see: T. H. Barrett, *The Rise and Spread of Printing: A New Account of Religious Factors*, “SOAS Working Papers in the Study of Religions”, London 2008.) argues that printing had already been invented by the late seventh century. In another book (see: Idem, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing*, New Haven 2008.) Barrett goes further to claim that it was Empress Wu (625–705) who actually discovered the technology of printing. Cynthia J. Brokaw suggests that printing was probably invented sometime in the eighth century (see C. J. Brokaw, *Book History in Premodern China: The State of the Discipline I*, “Book History” 2007, 10, p. 253). Our still sparse knowledge about the early history of print in China is enriched by pioneer studies such as Carter (see T. Carter, *Invention of Printing in China and Its Spread Westward*, ed. L. C. Goodrich, New York 1955, p. 37–45.), Zhang (see X. Zhang 張秀民, *Zhongguo yinshuashu de faming jiqi yingxiang* 中國印刷術的發明及其影響 [*The Invention*

particular for the replication of Buddhist sutras and illustrations, the technology was soon embraced by commercial publishers and the state, who printed large numbers of medical manuals, almanacs, private calendars, dictionaries, and works on astrology, divination, and geomancy³. Thanks to early Song 宋 (960–1279) government printing projects, the increasing popularity of the civil service examinations, and the growing demand for imprints, printing spread widely. There is a well-designed format of leaflets to be observed in the Song imprints, including the size and position of various components, and most of these imprints used calligraphic characters which consciously imitated the style of famous calligraphers' brush strokes. Indeed, the development of Chinese printing reached its watershed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries during the Song. If the era of the Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907) and the following Five Dynasties 五代 (907–960) can be labelled as the formative period in the history of Chinese printing, the Song is convincingly called the first "golden age of Chinese printing"⁴.

After a falling-off in imprint production and a slow downturn in print culture in the fourteenth century, printing experienced an enormous boom from the mid sixteenth century onward. Within the history of the book in China, Ming 明 (1368–1644) printing was distinguished by the flourishing of private commercial printers, especially those in Jianyang in northern Fujian, who made print books inexpensive through the adoption of new technical skills in woodblock carving. By extending the scope of subject-matter and building up far-flung distribution networks, printed books were produced for a mass national market. The rapid advance of imprints during this period has been well studied, so I shall not dwell on the historical development of printing⁵.

[of *Chinese Printing and Its Influence*], Beijing 1958, p. 27–63; Idem, *Zhongguo yinshua shi* 中國印刷史 [A History of Chinese Printing], Shanghai 1989, p. 10–22.), Drège (see J. P. Drège, *La lecture et l'écriture en Chine et la xylographie* [Reading and Writing in China and the Xylography], "Études chinoises" 1991, 10.1/2, p. 77–112.), Cao (Z. Cao 曹之, *Zhongguo yinshuashu de qiuyuan* 中國印刷術的起源 [The Origin of Chinese Printing], Wuhan 1994).

³For some speculative observations on the earliest use of print in China, see for instance M. Strickmann, *The Seal of the Law: A Ritual Implement and the Origin of Printing*, "Asia Major", 3rd series, 6.2, p. 1–81; T. H. Barrett, *The Feng-tao k' o and Printing on Paper in 7th Century China*, "Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies" 1997, 60, p. 538–540, for the early commercial prints. It is fairly hard to identify how numerous or widespread these works were, because surviving examples of such prints are extremely scant see also T. Tsien, *Paper and Printing*, vol. 5, part 1 of *Science and Civilisation in China*, ed. J. Needham, Cambridge 1985.

⁴T. Tsien, op. cit., p. 159.

⁵For a graphic examination of the significant increase for Jianyang and Jiannan imprints from



With such a vast expansion in the quantity of printing in the late Ming, it is widely believed that much printing from this period did not observe the high standards established in the Song, in particular with regard to the artistic standards of the script styles used in printing and the quality of the block cutting. Many books were cheaply produced by commercial printers, with consequent poor print quality, careless editing, forgery and plagiarism, and even falsely attributed authorship. But at the same time, better Ming printers, especially the educated scholar printers, tried in various ways to escape those trends. This paper attempts to focus on the foremost and the most common method adopted by these printers to counteract the overall dullness of shoddily produced books: having printing blocks cut from pages written in distinctive calligraphy. After a brief outline of the general importance of calligraphy in Chinese culture, I will proceed to the change in the calligraphic style of characters used for printing that took place after 1500, concentrating on the widespread adoption of a nondescript style loosely designated the “craftsmen style”. The emphasis of this paper, however, is placed on a survey of extant imprints dating from the late Ming, roughly the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, to showcase how individual printers reinvented the particular importance of calligraphy in printing.

late Ming in the seventeen categories of the *Siku* 四庫 system see, for instance: L. Chia, *Counting and Recounting Chinese Imprints*, “East Asian Library Journal” 2001, 10.2, p. 69; Idem, *The Uses of Print in Ming Dynasty China: A Very Bried Survey*, [in:] *Books in Numbers*, ed. W. L. Idema, Cambridge MA 2007, p. 146. Chia’s calculation of extant Jianyang imprints shows that “slightly less than 10 percent” of all extant commercial publications from the Ming were printed in the first half of the dynasty (Eadem, *Mashaben: Commercial Publishing in Jianyang from the Song to the Ming* [in:] *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*, ed. P. Smith and R. von Glahn, Cambridge MA 2003, p. 303–304). Her data on imprints in Ming Nanjing reveal that nearly all imprints produced in Nanjing during the Ming were printed from the late sixteenth century onward (Eadem, *Of Three Mountains Street: Commercial Publishers in Ming Nanjing*, [in:] *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. C. Brokaw and K. Chow, Berkeley 2005, p. 128, table 3.2.). Through an extensive examination of extant Ming imprints held in the National Central Library in Taipei, Inoue Susumu notes that almost twice as many imprints were produced within the 34 years from 1522 to 1566 as in the first and a half centuries (1368–1521) of the Ming (S. Inoue 井上進, “Zōsho to dokusho” 藏書と讀書 [Book Collecting and Book Reading], *Tōhō gaku* 東方學報 1990, 62, p. 427–428, table 1 and 2).



2 THE IMPORTANCE OF CALLIGRAPHY IN CHINESE CULTURE

The importance of calligraphy was the result of a long process of artistic and intellectual development that probably began in accordance with the appearance of the Chinese script. Only few would be blind to the undeniable beauty of many examples of writing in the oracle and bronze inscriptions dating as early as to the fifteenth century BCE⁶. One of a multiplicity of forms, the Chinese script makes regular use of literally thousands of characters⁷. Moreover, its units are linear symbols of complete syllables that can be read as words, as semantic units. Although subjected to the discipline of traditions and the inventiveness of personal styles, the forms of the Chinese script are capable of a vast range of extension and variation. It is primarily because of this nature of the Chinese script that the linear symbols standing for the large number of morphemes of the Chinese language acquired their overriding importance as not only a writing system but also as art.

Another contributor to the elevated position of calligraphy in Chinese culture are the attitudes of the cultural elite in the later half of the Han 漢 dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.) toward the value of beautiful writing and the ability to execute it. Coinciding with the widespread use of paper for writing and the adoption of ink and writing brush are the theoretical considerations of aesthetics resulted from concurrent development in literature⁸. The importance attached to literary learning involved the upper stratum of the Chinese society in the daily use of writing. The entire learned elite were both performer and audience, both producer and consumer of the higher arts of the cultural milieu. Among all the literary and graphic arts that acquired their first maturity, the primary ones were those performed with brush, ink,

⁶On the early development of Chinese writing, see W. G. Boltz, *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System*, New Haven 1994. For a pioneer study of oracle bone writings see S. Tung, *Fifty Years of Studies in Oracle Inscriptions*, Tokyo 1964. On scripts incised in bronze and stone, see Y. Tseng, *A History of Chinese Calligraphy*, Hong Kong 1993, p. 21–74.

⁷Despite such a large number in total, only some one or two thousand of those are of high frequency in daily use.

⁸For a profound study of different stages in the development of scholarly learning, literature, and their relations to calligraphy see M. Nylan, *Calligraphy, the Sacred Text and Test of Culture*, [in:] *Character & Context in Chinese Calligraphy*, ed. C. Y. Liu, D. C.Y. Ching, and J. G. Smith, Princeton 1999, p. 16–77.



and paper – poetry and calligraphy⁹. It is interesting to note that Chinese elite society, in comparison to their later counterparts in Europe, did not hire its artists from other sectors or cultivate its poets from among eccentric specialists. Rather, all learned and cultivated men took part both in creation and in appreciation. Such a wide participation in writing made calligraphy a central fixation of the Chinese civilisation because practically everyone, as performer himself, could grasp the import of the master's achievements, even when he could not equal those. It is thus little wonder that most great Chinese calligraphers such as Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) were also renowned scholars during their time.

Certainly, the aesthetic and intellectual content of calligraphy in Chinese culture lies far beyond the present succinct concern, yet it shall at least lend us a sense of how the particular nature of the Chinese script and its position among the elite made it possible for it to become something more than merely “beautiful writing”, the literal meaning of calligraphy¹⁰. This brief outline of how calligraphy assumed its significance in Chinese culture may serve as a background against which we may analyse the reinvention of calligraphy in late Ming printing, because all readers in imperial China, including the Ming, were members of the learned elite, though some only poorly or partially educated. Produced for these readers, books were inevitably subjected to their aesthetic and intellectual taste and requirement.

3 TOWARD A DULL STANDARDISATION: THE ADOPTION OF THE “CRAFTSMEN STYLE” SCRIPT

As has been demonstrated above, the artistic and cultural considerations kept alive by the society's broad involvement with calligraphy as both premier art and literary learning found expression also in the design of printed books.

⁹Ibidem, p. 34–57.

¹⁰The term “calligraphy” derives from the Greek word *kalligraphia* meaning “beautiful writing”. Because of the nature of the Chinese script, it is to some extent unfair to classify the calligraphy of Chinese script as a separate species to the genus “calligraphia” to which Western calligraphy belongs. On scholars' concern on the issue, see Y. Chiang, *Chinese Calligraphy: An Introduction to Its Aesthetic and Technique*, Third Edition, Revised and Enlarged, Cambridge MA 1973, p. 1-2; F. W. Mote and H. Chu, *Calligraphy and the East Asian Book*, ed. H. L. Goodman, Boston and Shaftesbury 1989, p. 9.



The nature of the dominant printing technology used in traditional China, printing from woodblocks (xylography), made possible a great variety of typographical changes, and were able to lend a personality and individuality to the page, which fonts of a uniform type could not equal. Because woodblocks are carved by placing handwritten manuscript face down on the block, practically anything that the calligrapher writes can be transferred precisely to the block and, depending on the skill of the carver, can then be printed as written¹¹. As a result, almost all the idiosyncratic and stylistic variations of the calligrapher's hand could be reproduced in woodblock printing.

It should also be noted that printing in China began in one of the great ages of calligraphy. Although the great Tang masters such as Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 (557–641), Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿 (709–785), and Liu Gongquan 柳公權 (778–865) did not themselves, insofar as we know, write out texts for carving on printing blocks, calligrapher-copyists used rubbings of monumental inscriptions executed by these masters as models to produce texts for blocks¹². Although books printed in different times and different locations show variations in calligraphic styles, styles of Ouyang, Yan, and Liu were popularly adopted by printers in the Song period¹³. Printing from the early Yuan 元 (1271–1368) continued the Song tradition in use of calligraphic styles, yet printers soon favoured that of the contemporary calligrapher Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 (1254–1322) and shifted to his style, which is famous for being soft, feminine, and charming (Fig. 1)¹⁴. These great calligraphers, whose models were followed in varied ways, dominated Chinese printing until the end of the fifteenth century.

With a rapid boom in printing since the mid-sixteenth century, an era in eyes of Joseph P. McDermott that marked “the ascendance of imprints,” there began among late Ming printers a trend to use a homogenized style known as the “Song style” (*songti* 宋體)¹⁵. This was supposedly based on the

¹¹For a detailed study of woodblock printing and its printing process, see T. Tsien, op. cit., p. 172–174.

¹²Ibidem, p. 224. See samples of various calligraphic styles of these masters in Y. Chiang, op. cit., 41–105.

¹³Generally speaking, imprints from the Northern Song 北宋 (960–1126) largely follow closely the Yan style, while those of the Southern Song 南宋 (1127–1279) imitated the Ouyang style if produced in Hangzhou and the Yan and Liu style if produced in Fujian.

¹⁴T. Tsien, op. cit. p. 183; X. Zhang, *Zhongguo...*, op. cit., p. 508. For a number of finely printed books showing various degrees of Zhao's impact on book design in the late Yuan and early Ming see F. W. Mote and H. Chu, op. cit., p. 113–132.

¹⁵J. P. McDermott, *A Social History of the Chinese Book: Books and Literati Culture in Late*



calligraphic style of some imprints of the Song dynasty, but with repeated application to woodblocks by ordinary craftsmen, it became more rigid and straight, and eventually transmogrified into the mechanical, nondescript calligraphy which came to be called “craftsmen style” (*jiangti* 匠體) (Fig. 1)¹⁶.



Figure 1: *Da Ming yitong zhi* 大明一統志. Examples of different calligraphic styles of script used in the early Ming printing (left. 1461. Published by the Directorate of Ceremonial [*Sili jian* 司禮監]. National Central Library [Taiwan]. Collection Nr. 03201) and the late Ming printing (right. 1559. Published by *Guiren zhai* 歸仁齋. National Central Library [Taiwan]. Collection Nr. 02309).

Imperial China, Hong Kong 2006; T. Tsien, op. cit., p. 375.

¹⁶K. T. Wu, *Ming Printing and Printers*, “Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies” 1943, 7.3, p. 250–251; F. W. Mote and H. Chu, op. cit., p. 169. But Zhang argues that the script in the late Ming imprints is not identical to the authentic “Song style” and such script should rather be called “Ming style” (*mingti* 明體 or *mingchaoti* 明朝體). See X. Zhang, *Zhongguo...*, op. cit., p. 508. Zhang’s terminology is also supported by Heijdra. See M. Heijdra, *A Tale of Two Aesthetics: Typography versus Calligraphy in the Pre-modern Chinese Book*, [in:] *The Art of the Book in China*, ed. M. Wilson and S. Pierson, London 2006, p. 15.

The wide use of the “craftsmen style” characters allowed the publisher to squeeze more characters onto the surface of a woodblock and the severe restriction it placed on the range of a scribe’s strokes and carver’s cuts further lowered the costs. Both consequences greatly reduced the range of carving skills and therefore cut costs¹⁷. These “craftsmen style” characters present a broad trend toward dull standardization of Chinese script, presenting a uniformity and facilitating legibility. Nonetheless, individualistic liveliness and expressiveness of calligraphies waned because the mediocre and box-like “craftsmen style” paid little attention to the dynamic interplay in the original brushstroke order and style of the calligraphy. Predictably, the eyes of literati readers, who regarded calligraphy as an important art form that demonstrates the writer’s virtuous disposition, were not pleased. Bemoaning the use of such dull brushstrokes and its lamentable impact on the quality of the script found in late Ming imprints, the devoted late Qing 清 (1644–1911) scholar Qian Yong 錢泳 (1759–1844) lamented that “since the mid-Ming scribes [for woodblock carving] used square-like strokes, which were neither *Yanti* 顏體 (style of Yan Zhenqing) nor *Outi* 歐體 (style of Ouyang Xun), and [the characters] transmogrified into non-script”¹⁸.

The situation further deteriorated with the tendency, especially among the commercial publishers, to cram as many characters onto a sheet as possible, sometimes far more than normally feasible on a hand-written sheet. In other cases, hackneyed illustrations accompany the texts with misprints scattered here and there. Inasmuch as such features are most commonly to be found in the shoddily produced imprints produced in Masha in northern Fujian, a special derogatory term, *mashaben* 麻沙本, was created to describe those Ming imprints of relatively poor physical quality – bad quality paper, pallid ink, badly printed characters, and smudgy appearance¹⁹. No wonder, these *mashaben*, of low costs but sparing of aesthetic considerations, were not valued by literati cognoscenti.

¹⁷L. Chia, *Printing for Profit: The Commercial Publishers of Jianyang, Fujian (11th–117th Centuries)*, Cambridge MA 2002, p. 11, 38, and 197.

¹⁸Y. Qian 錢泳, *Lüyuan conghua* 履園叢話 [*Comprehensive Talk of Qian Yong*], 1838 [courtesy of Eastern China Normal University Library (Shanghai)], 12: 15a–b.

¹⁹In fact, *mashaben* already appeared during the Song and Yuan periods and were often condemned by Song and Yuan writers. This term was commonly used in the Ming to exemplify all the abuses found in earlier imprints. For a detailed study of the *mashaben* see L. Chia, *Printing...*, op. cit., p. 116–126 and eadem, *Mashaben...*, op. cit.



4 FACSIMILE CALLIGRAPHY IN LATE MING PRINTING

The most evident result of the wide-spread use of the “craftsmen style” as the principle calligraphic style for the script of the imprints was a widening gap between pre-1500 books employing an older calligraphic style and those later printed with “craftsmen style” script, and even a much wider gap between manuscripts and imprints. Accompanying such developments in the late Ming, however, was a backhanded acknowledgement among the educated readers of the specific value of elegant calligraphy. It is thus interesting to find that some late Ming printers, in contrast to most of their counterparts who produced large numbers of cheap and shoddy imprints, endeavoured to escape these trends by reintroducing calligraphy into printing.

In an attempt to bridge the gap between the printed and the written word, some publishers consciously imitated the high standards of the treasured Song books by using *xieke* (寫刻, carved as written) – that is, carving printing blocks by faithfully emulating the author’s handwritings in grass, running, or standard script²⁰. In a broader sense, anything printed by woodblock can be described as *xieke*, since the handwritten word is translated to woodblocks by placing the hand-copy face down on the block to be carved. But this term eventually implies that the writing is not of nameless craftsmen calligraphers, but executed by having printing blocks cut from pages written in distinctive calligraphy made by both well-known and unknown calligraphers²¹.

Despite the unavoidable slight jaggedness of printed characters resulting from cutting through wood with a knife, script in *xieke* versions vividly approach the flowing brushstroke of the handwritten counterpart. All the idiosyncratic and stylistic variations of the calligrapher’s hand could then be duplicated in printing. Although *xieke* was not new to Ming printers, this trend was taken up after the mid-Ming with a new enthusiasm.

One of the most artistic *xieke* books printed in the late Ming is the *Wang Wenke gong ji* 王文恪公集 (“Collected Works of Wang Ao”) (Fig. 2), the liter-

²⁰Ye notes that *xieke* was already used during the Yuan to imitate the calligraphy of Zhao Mengfu. See D. Ye 葉德輝, *Shulin qinghua:fuShulin yuhua* 書林清話: 附書林余話 [*Plain Talks about Books and Further Talks about Books*]. 1911 and 1923, Changsha 1999, 7: 2b-3a.

²¹Sören Edgren goes further to believe that *xieke* indicates that the carver was also the calligrapher (as quoted in L. Chia *Printing...*, op. cit., p. 367, note 57).



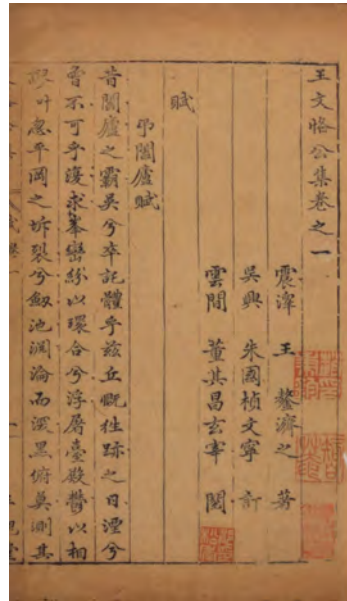


Figure 2: *Wang Wenge gong ji*. 1573–1617. Published by Sanhuai tang. National Central Library (Taiwan). Collection Nr. 11504.

ary anthology of Wang Ao 王鏊 (1450–1524). Cut on the basis of a late 1530s edition with the same content but a different title, this work was printed by Wang's great-great-grandsons sometime during the reign of Wanli (1573–1617) in the Sanhuai tang 三槐堂 of the Wang family, as recorded in the centre-page block²². Next to a preface written by Huo Tao 霍韜 (1487–1540) in 1536 for the earlier edition, the latter version of the anthology also bears two undated prefaces by Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1556–1637) and Zhu Guozhen 朱國禎 (d. ca 1625), respectively. The work does not give any information about the actual calligrapher, yet through a comparison of the calligraphy in this work with that in Shen Zhou's literary anthology, *Shen Shitian ji* 沈石田集, whose calligraphy is identified, Wang Chongmin asserts that the beautiful

²²The earlier edition of the work carries the title *Zhenze xiansheng ji* 震澤先生集 [Collection of Essays of Wang Ao]. On Wang Ao and his *Wang Wenke gong ji*, see T. Zhang 張廷, *Mingshi* 明史 [History of the Ming Dynasty]. Originally compiled in 1739. Collated and punctuated edition, Beijing 1974, 97: 2384 and 181: 4825–4837; *Dictionary of Ming Biography: 1368-1644*, ed. C. L. Goodrich and Ch. Fang, New York 1976, p. 1343–1347; *Guoli zhongyang tushuguan* 國立中央圖書館. *Mingren zhuanji ziliao suoyin* 明人傳記資料索引 [An Index to Biographic Materials of Ming Personalities], Taipei 1965-1966, p.575.

calligraphy, with a touch of the lively style of Zhao Mengfu, must have been executed by Chen Yuansu 陳元素 (fl. 1590–1630), a respected artist who excelled in the Ouyang and Zhao styles²³. It is not clear whether the original copy for the printing block was carved in a facsimile of Chen's own hand or whether his calligraphy was simulated. In any case it is obviously an effort to reassert the individuality and liveliness of calligraphy, in opposition to the increasing tendencies in Ming printing to standardise character styles.

A number of books from the late Ming, frequently printed in multi-colour, have marginalia added throughout the work²⁴. Renowned across collectors of Ming books are the “Min woodblock editions” (*Min ke ben* 閔刻本) produced by Min Qiji 閔齊伋 (1580–1661). A fine example of Min's multi-colour printed books is the *Tangshi yanyi pin* 唐詩豔逸品 (“*Exemplars of the Beautiful and the Refined in Tang Poetry*”) (Fig. 3)²⁵. The first edition of this work, compiled by a certain Yang Zhaozhi 楊肇祉 (fl. 1610s), was printed in 1618 with punctuation marks but no commentaries²⁶. Dated 1621, this version of *Tangshi yanyi pin* is printed with text in black and with comments in red on the top margin and between the lines, as well as red circles highlighting noteworthy phrases²⁷. It is noteworthy that while the text is printed in the more rigid “craftsmen style” typical of late Ming imprints, the comments display a cursive style of handwriting evidently bearing the influence of Zhao

²³Z. Wang 王重民, *Zhongguo shanbenshu tiyao* 中國善本書提要 [A Descriptive Catalogue of Rare Chinese Books], Shanghai 1983, p. 575; F. W. Mote and H. Chu, op. cit., p. 171.

²⁴Multi-colour printing is a facet of Ming printing. Although colour printing can be dated to the early twelfth century, it was further developed toward the end of the sixteenth century. On the multi-colour printing in the Ming, see D. Ye 葉德輝, *Shulin qinghua: fu Shulin yuhua* 書林清話: 附書林余話 [Plain Talks about Books and Further Talks about Books], 1911 and 1923, Changsha 1999, p. 7: 14a–15a; T. Tsien, op. cit., p. 277–283; X. Zhang, *Zhongguo...*, op. cit., p. 448–453; S. Edgren, *Chinese Rare Books and Color Printing*, “East Asian Library Journal” 2001, 10.1, p. 25–52.

²⁵See Z. Wang 王重民 *A Descriptive Catalogue of Rare Chinese Books in the Library of Congress*, ed. T. L. Yuan, Washington D.C. 1957, Vol. 2, p. 1061–1062; J. Shen 沈津, *Meiguo Hafo daxue Hafo Yanjing tushuguan Zhongwen shanben shuzhi* 美國哈佛大學哈佛燕京圖書館中文善本書志 [A Catalogue of Rare Chinese Books in the Harvard-Yenching Library of the Harvard University], Shanghai 1999, p. 522, cat. no. 0928; *Visible Traces: Rare Books and Special Collections from the national Library of China*, ed. P. K. Hu, New York 2000, p. 60–64, cat. no. 14.

²⁶This edition is printed by Li Qianyu's 李乾宇 *Shengyun ge* 盛芸閣.

²⁷Z. Wang 王重民, *Zhongguo...*, op. cit., p. 20. For details of a copy of the work kept in the Gest Collection of the Princeton University Library, see W. Qu, *A Catalogue of the Chinese Rare Books in the Gest Collection of the Princeton University Library*, Taipei 1974. P. 27; F. W. Mote and H. Chu, op. cit., p. 145–148.



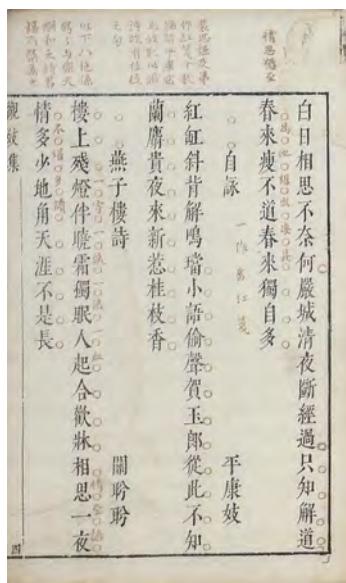


Figure 3: *Tangshi yayi pin*. 1621. Published by Min Qiji. National Library of China (Beijing). Collection Nr. 18666.

Mengfu. The calligraphy and pungent comments enhance a sense of realism, as if the book had been personally annotated by a scholar as he was reading it.

More often, however, the entire book was not printed in the real or simulated calligraphy of the artist. Even when the main text was copied in the “craftsmen style” by professionals, publishers used more distinctive calligraphic styles for certain sections set off from the main text, such as the cover page, the preface, marginal comments, and the publishers’ colophons and notices²⁸. For title pages, the calligrapher might adopt the clerical (*lishu* 隸書) or seal script (*zhuanshu* 篆書) to give a touch of antique elegance. The remaining front-matter often used the cursive running (*xingshu* 行書) or grass script (*caoshu* 草書). Prefaces or forewords were usually signed by their authors, the presumption being that the personal calligraphy reproduced there was a facsimile of the original handwriting. An in-print of the literary collection *Yunpi* 運甕 (“On Assiduity”) printed during the Wanli reign-period, for instance, contains three prefaces and each was rendered in a different

²⁸T. Tsien, op. cit., p. 225.

calligraphic style to that of the main text (Fig. 4)²⁹.

The prefaces to the *Fangshi mopu* 方氏墨譜 (“*The Fang Family Chart of Ink Illustrations*”), an ink specimens manual brought up by Fang Yulu 方于魯 in Huizhou in 1589, present a vivid example of collaboration between writer, calligrapher, and publisher³⁰. Bound in eight volumes, the work illustrated some four hundred specimens of ink-cakes made by Fang and reproduced in facsimile scores of eulogies by noted scholars and literati: most of the decorative ink-cakes have a pictorial representation on one side and a poem or other text on the other side³¹. Among a total of four complimentary prefaces, all by Fang’s contemporaries, one was printed in facsimile of the original handwriting of Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–1590), the recognised Ming scholar and book collector³². Sometimes a preface might not be written by the author himself but by a noted calligrapher on his behalf. Another preface to the *Fangshi mopu* is such a distinctive collaboration between Li Weizhen 李維楨 (1547–1626), a preeminent versatile and prolific writer, and Zhu Duo Zheng 朱多炘 (1541–1589), an acclaimed calligrapher (Fig. 5)³³.

The impression that with these prefaces in authentic calligraphy of renowned personalities Fang aimed to attract the interest of literati cognoscenti is reinforced by another contemporary work on designs of ink-cakes. Printed in 1606 by Cheng Dayue 陳大約, who had once befriended Fang and taught him the art of ink-making, the *Chengshi moyuan* 程氏墨苑 (“*The Cheng Family Compendium of Ink Illustrations*”) attempted to surpass Fang’s effort other than sheer quantity³⁴. The great interest of this work lies not just in its exquisite illustrations, many of them printed in more than one colour, but also in their accompanying texts and inscriptions. All these writings were carved in careful tracings of the original beautifully executed calligraphic works, most of them made by the authors. With contributions from almost

²⁹L. Chia, *Printing...*, op. cit., p. 200–201.

³⁰On Fang Yulu, see *Dictionary of Ming...*, op. cit., p. 438.

³¹For a detailed discussion of *Fangshi mopu*, see Ch. Wang, *Notes on Chinese Ink*, “Metropolitan Museum Studies” 1930, 2.1, p. 126–128; S. Edgren et al., *Chinese Rare Books in American Collections*, New York 1984, p. 102–103; F. W. Mote and H. Chu, op. cit., p. 139.

³²W. Qu, *A Catalogue...*, op. cit., p. 274; F. W. Mote and H. Chu, op. cit., p. 178. For a biography of Wang Shizhen see T. Zhang 張廷, *Mingshi...*, op. cit., p. 287: 7379–7381.

³³W. Qu, *A Catalogue...*, op. cit., p. 274 and 465; F. W. Mote and H. Chu, op. cit., p. 175–176. For a biography of Li Weizhen, see T. Zhang 張廷, *Mingshi...*, op. cit., p. 288: 7385–7387.

³⁴On the history and details of the work, see Ch. Wang, *Notes...*, op. cit., p. 128–130; K. T. Wu, *Ming Printing and Printers*, “Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies” 1943, 7.3, p. 204–205; *Visible Traces...*, op. cit., p. 39–43, cat. no. 9.



two hundred well-known scholars, Cheng tried to showcase his extensive circle of acquaintances. Dong Qichang, for instance, one of the greatest calligraphers and painters of the Ming, wrote a preface to the book in his beautiful calligraphy (Fig. 6). It is also worth noting that Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), the Jesuit priest who had helped to introduce Western science and propagate Christian doctrine in China, furnished Cheng’s book with four biblical illustrations from the Gospels, each with a Chinese postscript – presumably in Ricci’s own handwriting (Fig. 7)³⁵. The postscripts, written in the parallel columns of the Chinese tradition, were accompanied by original phonetic spelling and may constitute the first major Romanisation scheme for the Chinese language.

Certainly it would be considerably hard for publishers to find celebrated people to write prefaces or afterword for every publication. In such cases, the publisher might hire someone to compose a false writing by imitating the calligraphy of renowned scholars. A typical example is the preface to the 1623 edition of the *Nanyou gao* 南游稿 (“Draft of the Travel to the South”) by Chen Zhaoji 陳兆基 (fl. 1620s), an obscure person from Putian, Fujian (Fig. 8). Although the preface bears a signature of the established scholar Zhu Zhifan 朱之蕃 (1546–1624), who had been first in the palace examinations in 1595, an observation of the calligraphic style and the content of the text suggest cogently that this attribution is probably spurious³⁶. Such intended false attributions to famous literati of the day can quite often be found in late Ming imprints, especially in those relatively sloppily produced imprints by commercially oriented printers from Jianyang. In fact, they reflect a common practice of late Ming publishers to add credibility and marketability to their products by satisfying the aesthetic desire of late Ming literati readers, even in fraudulent ways.

This prevailing trend to insert artistic tone into the front matter of a printed book first appeared in the books printed by family publishers and connoisseurs, but it soon became a fashion also imitated by commercial printers. As the first thing to see when the reader opened the cover page, these

³⁵The section with Ricci’s illustrations and postscripts was entitled “Xizi qiji” 西字奇蹟 [Western Script and Miracles]. The four illustrations are: “信而步海，疑而即沉”，“二徒聞寶，即舍空虛”，“淫穢色，自速天火”，and “天主”. For a detailed discussion of Ricci’s illustrations see Ch. Wang, *Notes...*, op. cit., p. 128; K. T. Wu, op. cit., p. 205–206; C. Guarino, *The Interpretation of Images in Matteo Ricci’s Pictures for Chengshi moyuan*, “Ming Qing yanjiu” 1997, 6, p. 21–44.

³⁶For a profound study of the authenticity of this preface see F. W. Mote and H. Chu, op. cit., p. 188.



sections executed in personal calligraphy were expected to catch the eye of their literati buyers. The persistent inclination to draw upon the personalising presence of fine calligraphy in printed books, rather than the mechanised and mediocre printing script, transmitted to later readers a continuous aesthetic sensibility for the elegance of individual handwritten calligraphy. The use of these varieties of calligraphies, as Lucille Chia aptly argues, also flattered a reader by implying that he belonged to the educated elite with the learning and aesthetic cultivation to decipher and appreciate these more sophisticated styles³⁷. Thus these sections executed in personal calligraphy were expected to lend flavour with the intention to attract literati buyers. The large body of prefaces written by various scholars in the two somehow competing works of *Fangshi mopu* and *Chengshi moyuan* represent a vivid example of this strategy.

³⁷A more prevailing trend is to insert artistic tone into the front matter of a printed book, first appearing in the books printed by family publishers and connoisseurs, it then soon became a fashion imitated by commercial printers.



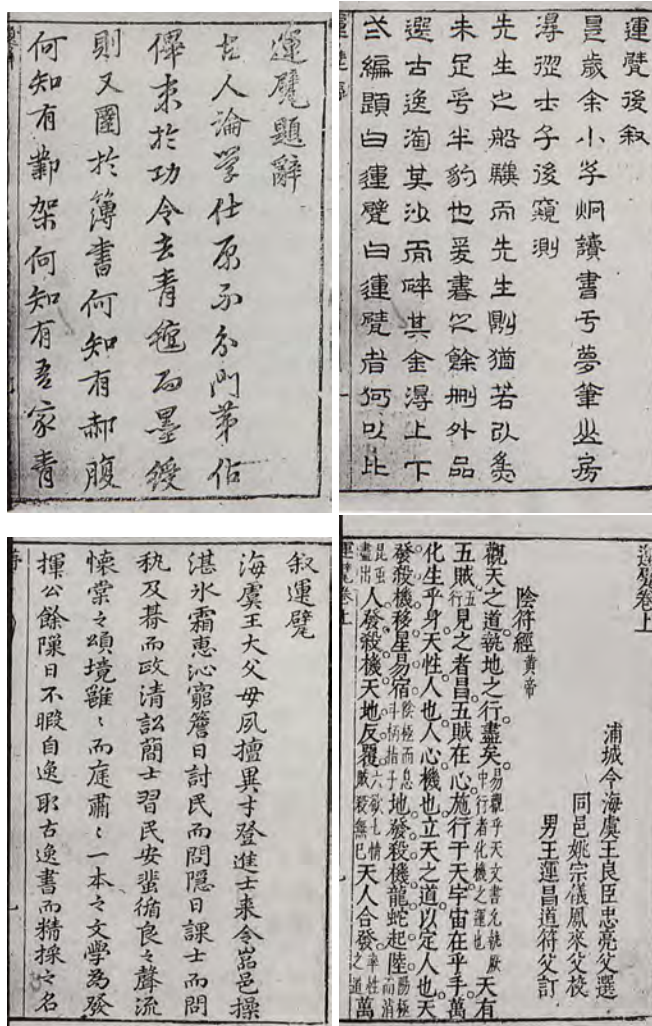


Figure 4: Yunpi. Example of different calligraphic styles in the front matter (top and bottom-left) and the main text (bottom-right). 1573–1617. Published by Wu Yanming 吳彥明. National Central Library (Taiwan). Collection Nr. 13849. From: Chia 2002, 201, fig. 36.

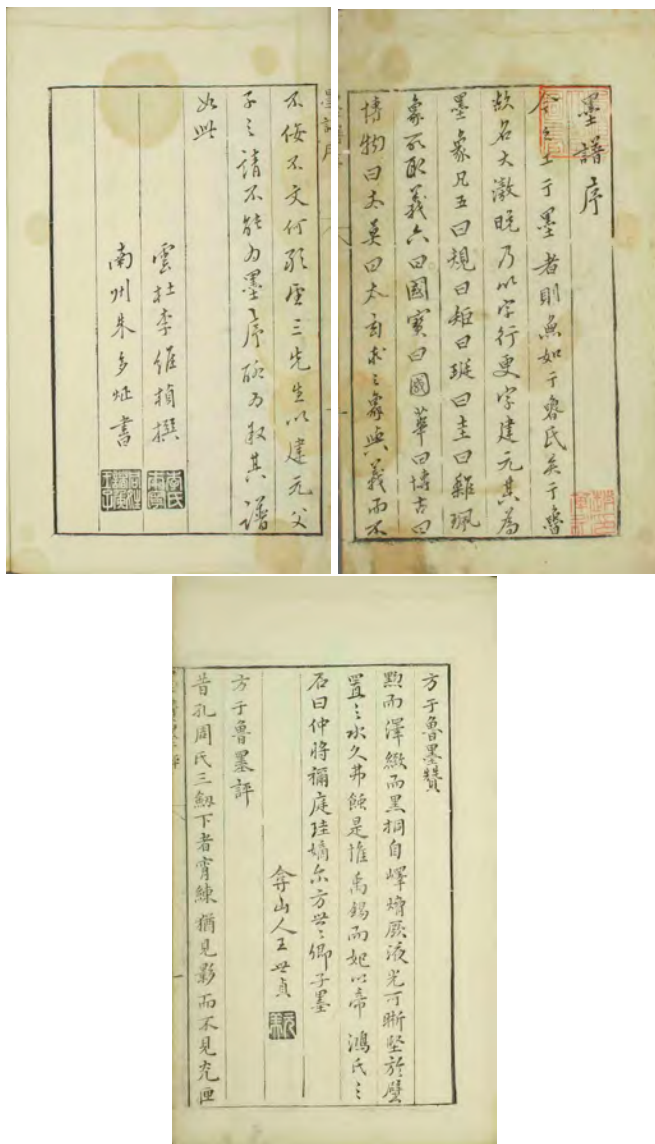


Figure 5: *Fangshi mopu*. Prefaces by Li Weizhen and Zhu Duo Zheng (top) and by Wang Zhizhen (bottom). 1589. Published by Fang Yulu. Kyoto University Library.

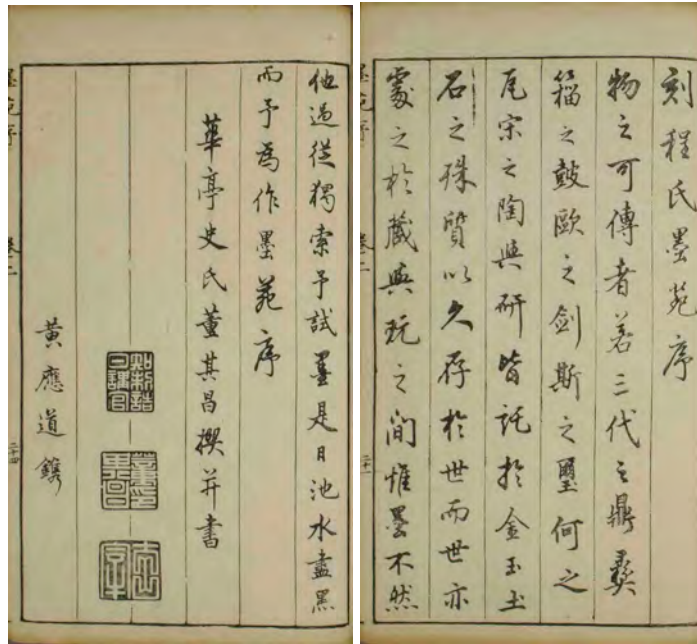


Figure 6: *Chengshi moyuan*. Preface by Dong Qichang. 1606. Published by Cheng Dayue. Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art (London).



Figure 7: *Chengshi moyuan*. Illustration and script of Xin er bu hai by Matteo Ricci. From: Guarino 1997.

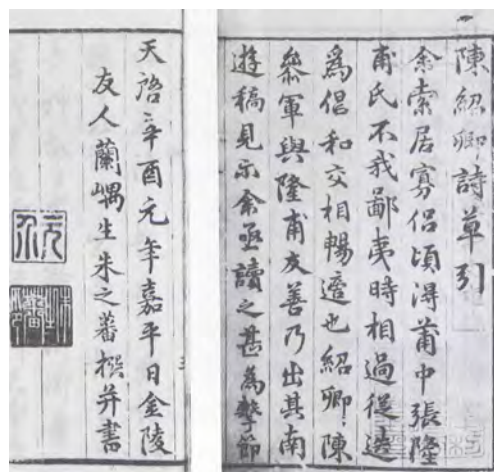


Figure 8: *Nanyou gao*. 1623. Authored by Chen Zhaoji. Photographic copy of the original kept in Naikaku Bunko. From: Mote and Chu 1989, 190, fig. 105.

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The dynamic role calligraphy has played in late Ming woodblock printed books invites us for a series of considerations of the history of books in China. First, as shown above, even in the time of the great ascendance of imprints, the persistent manuscript tradition continued to shape the appearance of woodblock imprints with the highly calligraphic styles that grace not only frontispieces and prefaces but sometimes even the content of the Chinese book. The influence of the manuscript on the imprint, as Joseph P. McDermott has forcefully suggested, may have even gone beyond the physical appearance to shape its contents. Quite often there is a remarkable textual fluidity, which is typical in the Chinese manuscript culture, to be observed in the imprint³⁸.

Secondly, next to the evident and continuous impact of the manuscript culture on printing, it is also interesting to observe that this interplay between manuscripts and imprints did not take place as a one-way interaction. In fact, the aesthetics and appearance of manuscripts have greatly influenced the design of imprints, while printed books also found a direct expression in the creation of manuscript books. Eager to restore the earlier standards of book production, some literati and connoisseurs, for example, found new

³⁸J. P. McDermott, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

ways to reproduce Song works, through handwritten copy. Certainly it is not only to produce the letters of the original, but also indeed to duplicate the original with special care and fine craftsmanship, and as closely as possible in terms of size, page layout, format, as well as calligraphic style. These facsimile duplications, in the closest approximation of their Song predecessors, even became a special category in the history of books in China, dubbed *yingsong chao* (影宋鈔, facsimile of the Song) (Fig. 9)³⁹. The sixteenth century marked a critical juncture in the historic transition from manuscript to print in China. But the popularity of the imprint did not inevitably result in a corresponding decline or demise of manuscript production. In fact, this flourish of printed works did not eliminate either the use or the influence of manuscripts in the late Ming, and manuscripts coexisted with printed books as “an important vehicle for textual transmission well into the twentieth century”⁴⁰.

Thirdly, this strong Chinese insistence on calligraphy may grant us some insights into some East–West differences in printing aesthetics. The early makers of printed books, both in China and in Europe, felt themselves under great pressure to imitate existing manuscript books, adapting their standards as convincingly as possible to the production of printing. But the aesthetic preferences surrounding the development of books, in particular concerning the appreciation of calligraphy, was quite different. In Europe, the “typographic aesthetic” developed because of the use of type⁴¹. At the beginning of printed books in Europe, the effort to duplicate the calligraphy of exquisite manuscript books went so far that even insignificant variations in the forms of letters and their connections in words were cast in type. Soon later, however, these features were abandoned in the interests of economy⁴². European printing quickly induced an expectation of legibility and simplicity and its processes accordingly developed a set of requirements centred on simplification.

³⁹On the *yingsong chao*, see the excellent summary and study by the avid Qing bibliophile Sun Congtian. Sun Congtian 孫從添. *Cangshu jiyao* 藏書記要 [Manual of Book Collecting], Lithographic reprint of the 1871 Cangxiu shuwu 藏修書屋 edition, Shanghai 1914.

⁴⁰T. Meyer-Fong, *The Printed World: Books, Publishing Culture, and Society in Late Imperial China*, “Journal of Asian Studies” 2007, 66.3, p. 789–790.

⁴¹M. Heijdra, op. cit., p. 18.

⁴²For accounts on the European case see H. J. Graff, *The Labyrinths of Literacy: Reflections on Literacy Past and Present*, Philadelphia 1987, p. 11 and P. Heyer, *Communications and History*, New York 1988, p. 150–151.



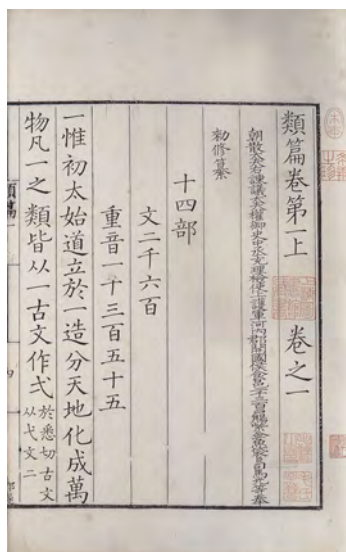


Figure 9: *Leipian* 類編. *Yingsong chao*. Early 17th cent. Produced by Mao Jin's 毛晉 (1599–1659) *Jigu ge* 汲古閣. National Palace Museum (Taiwan). Collection Nr. 014139

ation, uniformity, and standardisation⁴³. Although some typefaces could be very beautiful, they could not transcend the mechanical dullness resulting from frequent repetition of identical forms. But for most readers, they did not feel any loss in the dulling of the aesthetic impact that typography inevitably induced. Since standardisation, routinisation, and tendencies toward dull uniformity were already present in the nature of most alphabetic scripts, so there was no notable wrench when handwritten pages were superseded by typography in Europe. In general, despite a brief initial phase of continuing influence, the links between calligraphy and the printed book in the West were rather easily broken when printing intervened.

In China, on the contrary, the particular value that the Chinese literati readers attributed to distinctive and personalised calligraphy militated against the development of a set of aesthetics for evaluating the look of an imprint different from that of a manuscript. Chinese woodblock printed books in fact never broke away from the model of handwritten manuscripts, as European books did. The traditional Chinese view had always been that the finest imprint was the one that most closely approximated, largely through

⁴³F. W. Mote and H. Chu, op. cit., p. 11.

elegant calligraphy, a beautiful manuscript. Certainly woodblock printing was not the only technology available to early modern Chinese printers, as printing with moveable type was invented as early as the mid-eleventh century⁴⁴. However, because woodblocks could be carved individually for each publication and therefore retain the distinctiveness of each calligraphic style, until the advent of modern typography in the twentieth century, woodblock printing had been the principle vehicle of traditional Chinese printing, dominating the world of Chinese printing for a long time span stretching over eleven centuries.

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⁴⁴T. Tsien, op. cit., p. 201–203; X. Zhang, *Zhongguo...*, op. cit., p. 663–668.



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ABSTRACT, KEYWORDS, ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abstract

China under the late Ming witnessed a vast boom in book production and a rapid expansion of commercial printing, in particular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. With the proliferation of imprints, however, both the artistic standards of the script styles used in printing and the quality of the woodblock cutting tended to decline. In place of characters in calligraphic styles of previous great calligraphers, mid-Ming printers began using the mediocre and nondescript “craftsmen style”. But other printers tried to counteract this standardisation and overall dullness of the script by having printing blocks cut from pages written in distinctive calligraphy. In this paper I intend to examine the new importance of calligraphy in late Ming China printing. After a brief outline of the general importance of calligraphy in Chinese culture and the change in calligraphic styles in printing after 1500, I will focus on a selection of imprints dating from the late Ming to illustrate how individual printers reinvented the particular importance of calligraphy in printing by faithfully translating the handwritten calligraphy into printing blocks. I shall also suggest how this examination can help facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the history of printing and book culture in imperial China and how it can shed light on a comparative analysis of China and Europe.

Keywords: Printing, Calligraphy, China, Late Ming

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