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Home and the world: editing the “Glorious Ming” in woodblock-printed books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

Hui-Hung Chen^a

^a National Taiwan University, Taiwan

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BOOK REVIEW

Home and the world: editing the “Glorious Ming” in woodblock-printed books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, by Yuming He, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2013, xv + 343 pp., £29.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-674-06680-9

In the past decade, the soaring interest in the history of books in late imperial China has gained much attention, and the achievements of scholarly works in this fascinating field have again created many fresh avenues to be explored. Especially, given the cosmopolitan and commercial characteristics of late-Ming books, the diversity of the publications from this particular era has become a rich treasury of sources, revealing several layers of the society and culture. Yuming He’s book is one such product of exciting research. The author not only makes use of a couple of less well studied texts but also proposes quite an interdisciplinary approach to them; thus, her analyses are stimulating.

Starting with an insightful question: how and why the grandest imperial compilation of books in Qing China, *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (*Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*), rebuked the commercialization and “hucksterishness” of Ming books (2–3) – He intends to show, instead, how to use those unorthodox Ming books to enliven the pictures of that burgeoning book market, which was thirsty for woodblocks containing both texts and images; and also of the hybrid nature of this society that was interacting with different genres and channels of information – written, non-written, spoken and sung, and visual imagery. The publications that the author discusses, generally called popular texts or vernacular literature of the late Ming, cover three types discussed individually in three chapters: riddles and games, drama miscellany, and a best-selling book on foreign lands and peoples. That the positive effects of this heterodox literature could vividly highlight the characteristics of late-Ming society has already been recognized by scholars of book culture in late imperial China. He, on the other hand, emphasizes much more the interweaving of texts and pictures, and the interaction of writing (authors) with reading (readers), which involves the concept of performance – and thus that of the self and other – and of being “at home and in the world” (13). Since the re-editing and recycling of sources had become common, these books were regarded as “material artifacts” in their circulation in the commercial environment. As He claims that “the meaning of a text is intricately tied to its materiality (138),” including its visuality, her analyses bring to the fore in parallel the methods both for textuality and for visuality; and a balanced picture deriving from the interplay of words and images, or from any “cross-generic reproduction” (186), is hence beautifully achieved. This book can be recommended therefore as a demonstration of cross-disciplinary research, which engages with the concerns and issues of history, the history of art and literature, and societal and cultural history.

In her conclusion, the author attempts to argue that “these late Ming books also serve to re-present and edit what Ming China was” (249), because of their appropriative use of earlier texts or motifs beyond the particular time frame of late Ming, which she defines as from the 1570s to the 1650s. Although He narrates a story of these late-Ming books – “on its own term,” she asserts (3), as against the “entrenched dismissiveness” (2) of Qing’s bibliophiles, the way in which the fascinating image she builds up could relate to various aspects of

“Ming China” – a broader category and definition – is a complicated issue yet to be articulated. It seems that the author leaves room for the definition of “Glorious Ming,” suggested by the book’s title. Why and how those “hucksterish” books could be addressed by this term – denoting pride with political implications – points to the possibility of a further chapter after the conclusion.

Moreover, He discusses the *Luochong lu* 羸蟲錄 (*Record of Naked Creatures*), a book that assembles “images and descriptions of over a hundred types” of foreigners (203) and shows how the history of its wide dissemination could mark the contemporaneous expansion of global trade and thus of Ming’s vision of the world. The broader background in which to set this intriguing text is the historical context of European expansion and intensive cultural encounters between China and the outside world. However, in terms of a Chinese perspective into foreign and barbarian worlds, the *Luochong lu* extends its descriptions merely to Japan and Korea, and not beyond East Asia, to reach Europe and the rest of the global world. Thus, the way in which this text might be able to demonstrate the extensive scale that this period witnessed and recognized as “global” remains ambiguous. A surviving edition or copy currently found in the Vatican does not adequately prove its global scale. In the search for Ming’s vision of the broader world, and links to the global world, this issue inevitably raises concerns about other publications regarding foreign lands or by foreign peoples, such as European missionaries, that appeared prominently in the printing markets of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century China. But this is not the topic of this author here.

He’s book has elaborate and elegant discussions of some of the most interesting texts taken from the vernacular literature of late-Ming society, and it provides especially many valuable pictures of those texts and illustrations. This book highlights how a society and culture could have been shaped by the uses and distributions of its printed publications, and it can encourage more relevant research on the complex relationship between thought and expression. In addition, since He tries to propose an approach and concept of “book conversancy” rather than “literacy” (7), her discussions also exemplify the possible multiple exercise of an active reading of the text and image, while offering a challenging and provocative perspective into the book culture of late-Ming society.

Hui-Hung Chen
National Taiwan University, Taiwan
huihung@ntu.edu.tw

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