

The First Print Era: The Rise of Print Culture in China's Northern Song Dynasty. By Daniel Fried. London and New York: Routledge, 2024. Pp. 154. \$180.00 hardcover. \$49.49 e-book.

The First Print Era examines the impact that print had on the cultural policies of the state and the ideas and writings of literati in the Northern Song (960–1126). As Daniel Fried explains in his introduction, his goal is to investigate “how elite cultural actors understood (or misunderstood) the way in which their own milieu was being reshaped by print textuality” from the tenth through the early twelfth centuries (p. 12). He has produced an interesting, occasionally fascinating, study that both builds intelligently on the work of previous work on Song literary and print culture and offers new and original insights into the impact that print had on literati of the Northern Song.

Fried begins with the role of the state. In “Print and Canons at the Founding of the Song Dynasty” (Chap. 2) he posits a significant shift in the Northern Song away from an association of print with “popular” publishing (by which he means that not initiated by the state or elite literati) toward an assertion of print as the prerogative of the state, as the Song state embraced printing as a means of standardizing, canonizing, and distributing fundamentally important texts like the Classics. The Tang (618–907) and some states of the Five Dynasties period (907–960) did sponsor publication projects, but many of the printed texts produced of the period—popular almanacs, Buddhist sutras, Daoist hagiographies, medical texts, and rhyme books—were published outside the purview of the state or the scholarly elite. “Print was not necessarily a hierarchical and top-down technology” (p. 17). Fried notes that it might even have been judged inappropriate for truly important works: the fact that no canonical work of literature was printed then suggests “there was a stigma, at least during the Tang, against the use of print for culturally elite texts” (p. 17).

A change in the status of print begins during the Five Dynasties period, when two different states took the initiative to sponsor canonical printing projects. In 933, a minister of the Later Tang, Feng Dao 馮道 (882–954), initiated a printing of the Nine Classics in order to facilitate the transmission of texts that up to that time had been inconveniently displayed on stone steles. Two decades later, Wu Zhaoyi 吳昭裔 (d. 960), a minister in the state of Later Shu 後蜀, persuaded his ruler to print the Classics (and the *Wenxuan* 文選) for distribution to schools throughout the state in an effort to revive education in the war-torn southwest. Although the details of both enterprises are not clear, they nonetheless established a new conception of print as an effective medium for top-down standardization and canonization of select texts. This conception was of course very attractive to the early Song emperors, intent on centralizing political power, particularly as they chose the dramatic expansion of the civil-service examination system—a system reliant on education in the classical canon—as a means of tightening their authority over the elite. From its inception,

Fried argues, the Song understood print transmission “as a fully authoritative and formal act” (p. 18); printing a text became an act of canonization.

Although the Classics may have been the primary objects of canonization, Emperor Taizu 宋太祖 (r. 960–976) and Emperor Taizong 宋太宗 (r. 976–997) of the Song also recognized the need to engage the support of the Buddhist clergy and assert imperial authority over the *sangha*. To this end, in the year 972 Emperor Taizu of the Song ordered the publication of the Buddhist canon, an enormous project requiring 130,000 woodblocks, cut in Sichuan and transported in 980 to Kaifeng 開封, the imperial capital, for printing; this was the *Kaibao Canon* (*Kaibao Zang* 開寶藏), the first printed edition of the Buddhist canon.

More important as a means of engaging literati support, however, were the four great *Leishu* 類書 projects sponsored by the state, works that required the employment of scholars from throughout the empire: *Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記, *Taiping Yulan* 太平御覽, *Wenyuan Yinghua* 文苑英華, and *Cefu Yuanguai* 冊府元龜. These works also fulfilled the “early Song impulses of collecting and canonization as an antidote to the chaos of the Five Dynasties” (p. 22). Fried’s very interesting comparison of the printing histories of these four works explains their different purposes and supports some of his generalizations about the new conception of print in the Northern Song. The *Taiping Yulan*, as a collection of “imperial observations” (*yulan*), was given precedence, printed the first of the four in 983. *Taiping Guangji*, in contrast, although begun the same year of 977 and quickly cut into blocks by the following year, was not printed until much later, in the early twelfth century, most likely because, as a compendium of fictional writings, it was not considered suitable for the weightiness of print; it was, as one contemporary explains, “Not what scholars are anxious for” (p. 32). *Wenyuan Yinghua*’s publication was delayed again and again—indeed, until two centuries after its completion in 987—because it was judged to be poorly edited, a judgment revealing, Fried argues, a “deep consciousness of the lasting consequences of wide distribution of bad texts” (p. 30). Print is no longer a stigma, but the mode of reproduction reserved only for the most important texts; in the Song, a text had to be worthy of print.

Of course, the major object of the canonizing project of the Northern Song state was the Classics. As Fried reports in “Print, Classics, and the Road to Philosophy” (Chap. 3), the Five Classics, the core of the canon, had been, at the command of court, corrected (the Five Dynasties’ editions were seen as corrupt) and printed within forty years of the founding of the Song. The Imperial Academy (Guozijian 國子監), charged with the task and with the continuing re-editing, re-compiling, and re-printing of these and other classical texts throughout the dynasty, “regularized and framed the classics in a more settled format” (p. 41), providing the standardized texts necessary to support the radical expansion of the examination system instituted by the state. The Academy editions—large-format, well-produced, and expensive—could not meet

the increase in demand for the texts from eager students, however, and commercial publishers began to produce smaller and cheaper editions, often in “handkerchief” size, to suit the needs of the suddenly expanded audience for the texts. The new importance of the examinations stimulated, too, the publication of collections of examination essays, *shiwén* 時文, which could be used as models. These collections, although frequently the object of criticism and attempts at suppression by the state, nonetheless came to be seen by students as essential guides to examination success; and, as they gradually accrued the prefaces and commentaries associated with literati texts, they earned some degree of respectability as a new genre of publication.

Fried notes that print, together with the increased importance of the examination system, also had an impact on poetry. Tang poetry on the system, although plentiful, tended to take the form of rather general expressions of sorrow at failure; sometimes only the title of the poem revealed what the poet was sad about. In the Song, however, such poetry became more specific about the examination experience as well as more “bookish,” with a greater number of allusions to earlier poetry—now of course possible because of the wider availability of texts. Hints of the influence of a nascent *daoxue* 道學 appear, too, in the tendency of poets to attribute failure not to factionalism (as they had in the Tang) but to the need for greater self-cultivation.

The early *daoxue* thinkers, however, had a somewhat mixed response to the greater textuality of literati culture afforded by the rise of print in the Northern Song. They worried that the greater availability of texts, coupled with the pressures of the examination system, encouraged “reading for the test” rather than true study of the Classics. Yet, moving beyond the boundaries of the Northern Song, Fried points to a way in which there developed, with the rise of print, a new epistemology supportive of *daoxue*. Once knowledge that had earlier been transmitted covertly, in manuscript, to a few individuals (the example Fried employs is Zhou Dunyi’s 周敦頤 [1017–073] “cosmological meditation” on the *Taiji tu* 太極圖, passed on in manuscript to the two Cheng brothers alone), began to be circulated overtly, in print, to a much larger audience (in the form of Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 [1130–1200] print publication of Zhou’s *Taiji tu shuo* 太極圖說, with his own added commentary), it became open to the rational assessment of any reader who wished to engage. “There is a way in which the openness of print encourages certain assumptions of rational equality and openness to judgment of a given text,” Fried notes (p. 61); and he ventures to suggest that the eventual sanctification of *daoxue* as orthodoxy was “partially aided by some of the same powers of print that drove European religious and intellectual revolutions” (p. 61).

From these ruminations on the impact of print on philosophical thinking, Fried moves to a consideration of print and literati poetry and writing about poetry in “The Role of Print in Eleventh-Century Literati Culture” (Chap. 4). First, he notes the role that print played in the development of poetic style. The Xi Kun 西崑 style—a “convoluted, experimental” style that placed high value on allusions to the poetry

of the past—was dominant in the early eleventh century at least in part because the greater availability of poetry collections afforded by print made often-obscure allusion possible. Yet, Fried argues, this same development—the greater accessibility poets enjoyed to the works of the poetic tradition—ultimately served to eclipse the Xi Kun style. As the work of “ancient prose” stylists like Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) and Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819) was rediscovered and “canonized” in print (and in cheap as well as “beautiful” print), literati gradually embraced the simpler, more serious *guwen* 古文 style of these authors. The literati responsible for promoting these two Tang authors, Liu Kai 柳開 (947–1000), Mu Xiu 穆修 (979–1032), and Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072), saw the *guwen* style as better suited to writing about serious moral and philosophical concerns; it was proposed as a means of reforming examination-essay composition and correcting the excessive emphasis on stylistic innovation celebrated by the Xi Kun poets.

Fried argues, too, that the rise of print stimulated the creation and shaped the development of a whole new genre of writing, *shihua* 詩話 or “poetry talks.” Ouyang Xiu’s *Liuyi shihua* 六一詩話, a collection of anecdotes about lost poets and lost poetry (and seen as the first work of the genre), grew out of the author’s “concern over the success or failure of transmission that has been brought into the foreground of intellectual culture by the conditions of print” (p. 75). Living at a “moment of partial and limited print culture,” his interest was in preserving what might well be lost. But gradually, as preservation by print became more commonplace, writers like Liu Ban 劉攽 (1023–1089), Chen Shidao 陳師道 (1053–1102), and Ye Mengde 葉夢得 (1077–1148) began to turn to critique and poetic theory. This trend, toward greater discrimination in the evaluation of poetry, is most evident in the *shihua* of the Southern Song. Thus, “the plentiful availability of texts [was] changing how poetry [was] read—pushing away from Ouyang’s concern about preservation, and towards an evaluation in a world where textual profusion rather than loss [was] becoming a bigger concern” (p. 77).

The ability of print to create “textual profusion” created new anxieties for the state, however, by making possible, too, the extensive, wide-ranging dissemination of texts perceived to be dangerous. Ouyang Xiu observed—and warned the court about—the circulation of texts “unsuitable for transmission,” either because of their vulgar content or because they revealed state policies, fearing the “inconvenience” caused should such works reach “the barbarians” to the north; his concern was echoed years later by Su Zhe 蘇轍 (1039–1112). It was in part this heightened anxiety, coupled with the assumption that printing was a means of asserting the authority to canonize texts, that led to Su Shi’s 蘇軾 (1037–1101) conviction in the Crow Terrace Poetry Trial (Wutai Shi’an 烏台詩案) of 1079. Su’s “crime,” Fried argues, was allowing his self-published poetry, the work of a private author, to circulate widely, leaving him open to the charge that he was asserting a textual authority in rivalry with the state’s—

at least this was the argument that his enemies in the intense factional disputes of the 1070s made. The trial was the point at which “the culture lost its innocence around print, and came to understand that the boundary between public and private which print and manuscript had already delineated, was also a demarcation line between exposure and safety” (p. 87). Even as the association between print and canonization broke down in the Southern Song—as Fried notes, by then, “[p]rint had become too important to be reserved for important topics”—and as public figures continued to print their own works, authors had to be aware that it was “perfectly possible to be arrested for publishing the wrong thing” (p. 87).

Fried finally turns to “Print Culture as Visual Culture” (Chap. 5), a consideration of the relationship between calligraphy, rubbings (*taben* 拓本), and reprints, arguing that they “form an economy of aesthetic writing that requires the circulation of texts between them” and provide the “most obvious example of the inseparability of print culture and manuscript culture” (p. 95). The Song passion for making and collecting rubbings of calligraphy (either from steles, *bei* 碑, or carved woodblocks, *tie* 帖) served two ends: the creation of an art object and the production of models for imitative study.

The introduction of woodblock printing of calligraphy in the early Song indirectly spurred the critical study of calligraphy as an art. In 993, Emperor Taizong of the Song ordered the printing of a collection of the calligraphy of former worthies for distribution to ministers whose service he wished to honor. Known as the *Chunhua Era Palace Tracings* (*Chunhua Ge Tie* 淳化閣帖), this work at first enjoyed only a limited distribution, but eventually, over the course of the eleventh century, as it was recut, supplemented, and reprinted, it achieved relatively wide circulation in different editions of variable quality. This wide circulation, as well as the publication of several works analyzing the different editions, stimulated the development of calligraphic criticism (although Fried is careful to note that at this time the criticism was “belletrist,” concerned with the inculcation of humanist values, not with the “real scholarship” of textual criticism, a later development).

The fact that the reproductions were intended to be used as well for calligraphy practice—either by the *lin* 臨 method, in which one places a sheet of paper beside a rubbing or print and, after studying the reproduction, attempts to imitate it; or the *mo* 摹 method, in which one simply traces the model characters onto a thin sheet of paper placed over them—intensified awareness of the importance of process in the production of good calligraphy. Distinctions were made between a masterpiece tossed off by a true calligraphic genius and copies of such a masterpiece that, although of high quality, had been achieved through painstaking and exacting effort. This distinction encouraged, then, an emphasis in calligraphy criticism on the importance of individual spirit, spontaneity, and creativity, qualities that were believed to distinguish the artist-calligrapher from the highly skilled artisan-copyist.

As Fried notes, the Song was the period when the standing of calligraphy as art was consolidated through collection and criticism (and reproduction). The dynasty also produced two notable stylistic innovations in calligraphy: *Song ti* 宋體, a font well suited to woodblock cutting, for it employs sharp lines rather than continuous curves and short lines rather than dots; and *Shoujin ti* 瘦金體, the “thin metal style,” developed by no lesser a figure than the last emperor of the Northern Song, Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (r. 1100–1126). Fried presents an original and persuasive (as far as this reader, not an expert on calligraphy, can judge) theory about the antecedents of the thin metal style. He suggests that it developed, not out of the calligraphy of a famous practitioner of the past, as many scholars have claimed, but out of *Songti*, the style used in the Academy editions of the texts that the emperor would have studied as a youth. Comparing a sample of the imperial calligraphy to a line from the Academy-edition *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian), he points to similarities in perpendicular orientation, sharp hooks, standard-square proportions, etc. If this analysis is correct, we would have here an unusual example of a print font shaping calligraphic style.

Fried ends *The First Age of Print* with an epilogue, attached to this last chapter, that returns to the theme of loss and the ways in which the interest in print was driven by preservationist impulses. Northern Song literati thought about texts as what he calls “gestalt” texts—that is, works in which the text cannot be distinguished from its form. Thus, preservation meant preservation not just of text, but of the media through which the text was transmitted—paper, woodblock, or stone: “Because it was so easy to transfer the exact visual form of a text between paper, woodblock, and stone, the collection and preservation of that visual form became part of literati preservationist impulses” (p. 119). Li Qingzhao’s 李清照 (1084–1155) account of her husband Zhao Mingcheng’s 趙明誠 (1081–1129) as well as her devotion to the collation of their large collection of calligraphy, rubbings, manuscripts, and printed codices, reveals this concern for the preservation of textual materiality in the face of loss (in this case the gradual destruction of most of the collection in the wake of the Jin invasion). Even if print had by this time become the dominant mode of textual reproduction, Zhao and Li were still operating “in a sort of intermediary space between print and manuscript” (p. 121).

This is a stimulating and provocative work, full of penetrating and sophisticated analyses of the role of print in Northern Song political and literary culture. I have not been able to do anything like justice here to all of Fried’s many intriguing insights. As he acknowledges, he is, to be sure, often building on the excellent foundational scholarship of others—Susan Cherniack, Lucille Chia, Hilde De Weerd, Ronald Egan, Amy McNair, Yugen Wang, to name just a few—but in many cases he supplements and advances their work; and in many other cases he contributes genuinely original interpretations based on his own reading of the writings of Song literati.

It is unfortunate that the title of the book—*The First Print Era: The Rise of Print Culture in China's Northern Song Dynasty*—is somewhat misleading. (In passing I note the problem with identifying the Northern Song as the first age of print, given the consensus that print was present in China at least two centuries before the founding of the dynasty.) “The Rise of Print Culture” promises something like a comprehensive survey of the development of print and its impact on Song society at large, when the work is—as the author in fact makes clear early on (p. 12)—sharply focused on the impact of print on literati culture. Even within that topic, Fried’s treatment is selective. The last chapter, on print and visual culture, for example, despite its rather broad title, focuses—originally and even brilliantly, to be sure—on one slice of visual culture: the impact that the relationships between calligraphy, calligraphic rubbings, print reproductions of calligraphy, and print “fonts” had on in the Northern Song elite culture. I recommend the work very highly as a collection of original, finely argued, and occasionally provocative reflections on print and literati culture in the Northern Song (with some equally interesting hints about Southern Song developments)—but it is not the comprehensive survey that its title suggests.

It is to be hoped that Fried will continue this slender volume with a second on the Southern Song. Important developments and trends of the second half of the dynasty are referenced or hinted at here: the development of commercial publishing and increased publishing for non-elites (which would also have an impact on literati culture); the full flowering of Neo-Confucianism and the new print epistemology that assumes a “rational equality” of readers; the proliferation of “light, belletristic, and practical manuals on everything from architecture to chess strategy” (p. 87) that may or may not be an effort to avoid politically sensitive topics; the maturation of the *shihua* genre and calligraphy criticism; etc. Given how interesting Fried’s insights on the Northern Song are, I would like to read what he has to say about the print culture of the Southern Song. As it is, at times readers of *The First Print Era* may feel that they have been abandoned in the middle of the story, before the author has succeeded in developing his insights fully.

Otherwise, the work suffers from a few minor flaws. Some random statements are misleading: movable type printing, although it became more common in the Ming, was certainly not “dominant” during that dynasty (p. 2). The work would have benefited from more careful editing. This reader at least would like to know the second way in which Song print was “very different from what we might expect of a bona fide ‘print culture’” (p. 5); two differences are announced, but only one is provided. (I also wonder what a “*bona fide* ‘print culture’” is. Is woodblock printing not printing?) The fine final chapter on print and visual culture merits more than just three small illustrations.

Despite these small problems, *The First Print Era* is well worth the attention of both Chinese book historians and scholars of Song culture. Fried offers both deeper insights on established topics in Song print history (printing as canonization and the impact of print on literati thought and poetry) and original and provocative new interpretations, in particular of the relationship between print and calligraphy. It is to be hoped that the book's outrageous price—\$180 for the hardcover, almost \$50 for the e-book for a work of 154 pages—does not limit its circulation.

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