PROJECT MUSE®

Print Culture and Media in Late Imperial and Early
Republican China

Yu Zhang

China Review International, Volume 24, Number 1, 2017, pp. 1-7 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cri.2017.0000>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/718659>

Print Culture and Media in Late Imperial and Early Republican China

Suyoung Son. *Writing for Print: Publishing and the Making of Textual Authority in Late Imperial China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018. xiii, 249 pp. Hardcover \$39.95, ISBN 978-0-674-98383-0.

Megan M. Ferry. *Chinese Women Writers and Modern Print Culture*. Amherst and New York: Cambria Press, 2018. xiv, 271 pp. Hardcover \$109.99, ISBN 978-1-60497-938-1.

Rising interests in the printing, publishing, and book culture have profoundly changed our ways of understanding Chinese society, particularly from the perspective of material culture. Scholarship in recent decades has illuminated the developing technology from woodblock and lithography to modern printing services, the process how text and knowledge were made and transmitted, and ultimately, the role of printed texts and images played in shaping the modern nation-state.¹ In 2018 we are very fortunate to see two more monographs coming out concerning creation, publication, and circulation of texts and images, opening new paths to deepen our comprehension of print culture and media in late imperial and early modern China. In her crystal clear and compelling language in *Writing for Print: Publishing and the Making of Textual Authority in Late Imperial China*, Suyoung Son examines the interrelated practices of writing and publishing by two early Qing literati, Zhang Chao (1650–ca. 1707) and Wang Zhuo (1636–ca. 1707), when print culture was gradually taking shape with an expanding readership and profitable book market in late imperial China. Her research encourages us to reconsider the relationship between text, author, and reader within the context of (transnational) book production and book trade. Megan M. Ferry's *Chinese Women Writers and Modern Print Culture* is a meticulous achievement of nearly twenty-year research and six revisions, (re)exploring issues of modern women's intellectual authorship, identity, and labor as reflected in twentieth-century print media. Print culture is conventionally considered to represent and facilitate women's liberation in the modern age. However, in her analysis of media codes and conventions, Ferry alerts us that women writers were still treated merely as

an objectified cultural phenomenon, and they still experienced difficulties to be acknowledged as cultural producers like their male peers.

Both Son and Ferry begin their research questions by challenging conventional assumptions and narratives of print culture. Despite a general description of the thriving publishing industry in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China, Son goes in depth to (re)examine and (re)access the varied motives, technologies, as well as expectations and responses from readers in the cases of Zhang Chao and Wang Zhuo. She further demonstrates how the process of textual making and publishing helped to shape and mediate the two writers' intellectual identities and social statuses. Her investigation on the two popular literati writers shows two common directions in textual distribution: by selectively inviting collaborators and intentionally limiting the circulation of his works, Zhang Chao attempted to claim his prestige within the elite community. In contrast, Wang Zhuo generated his scholarly reputation by providing broad access for sharing his texts and ideas. Despite the seemingly opposite approaches, they both took advantage of the booming book market to build literary fame and enhance the commercial values of their works. Ferry's book moves to the modern era, analyzing print media under the influences of radical revolution, capitalism, commercialization, and commodification. In this important work, she criticizes the role of media through the lens of gender. Different from Son's examination of how print culture helped to create power among late imperial literati, Ferry has convincingly depicted how print media in twentieth-century China constructed both gender and identity, which, to a certain extent, tempered and regulated a woman writer's physical body as well as her intellectual authority. She further reveals the bitter truth that among writers of the modern period, the "interiority of the feminine space . . . largely remain the same as that of the past" (p. 89). Her book offers a complicated picture of modern women writers, both resisting and collaborating with the patriarchal print market, with mixed feelings of self-doubt, pity, and struggle.

The shared methodologies adopted by Son and Ferry are inspiring. First, in both Son and Ferry's writings, print culture is set as a broader context when discussing subjectivities and agencies of late imperial/early Republican writers. Son pays attention to how the previously neglected logistics (i.e., printing technology, editorial agenda) played a role on writers' motives and their texts to create an elite taste. Moreover, in her examination of multiple literary journals, magazines, and newspapers, Ferry showcases how modern women writers fought against criticism from their male peers and strategically used literary and narrative techniques to defend their intellectual labor, seeking solutions for respect and opening space for new identities.

Second, both Son and Ferry pay close attention to the connection between flourishing print culture and commercial interests of knowledge within the broader context of the (emerging) capitalism and commodification. Son spends

her entire chapter 3 analyzing the various marketing strategies among late imperial writers and commercial booksellers. She argues that in shaping the textual authority, the book's academic merit was measured in direct proportion to its market value. On the other hand, Ferry examines writing women's images that appeared in copious books and journals. These images range from submissive representations of traditional womanly virtues, bold resemblances of revolutionary spirit, exotic symbols of luxury life style in the modern consumer society, to even female writers without a name or identity. She describes how capitalism could lure the consumers into material possession and points out without mercy that in the publishing world, even the rebellious and revolutionary image of Ding Ling was used resourcefully to help with the sales of literary magazines (pp. 58, 71). The patriarchal and hierarchal commercial market commodified women writers, or defined them as passive consumers at best. Women had to fight to be seen as active producers equally contributing to the industry.

Both Son and Ferry examine authors and their texts beyond the primary narratives and extend to display how paratext further constructed and enhanced literary values. Son studies how Zhang Chao and Wang Zhuo solicited paratextual materials, such as prefaces, postscripts, endorsements, or comments to increase the trade value of their books. Echoing her discussion on paratext, Son even inserts vignettes at the beginning of each chapter to make her scholarly book more readable. These vignettes not only contextualize her surveys in these chapters but also add a layer of artistic feature when exploring history. Similarly, Ferry brings new understandings of women's positions in the competitive media market, expanding the research vision into publishing apparatus, literary criticism from male editors and readers, and visual materials (i.e., photos, illustrations, advertisements). She further suggests that paratext might as well be considered as "a technology of gender" and "one of the dominant vehicles for self-identification" (p. 24), marking the "femaleness" of women writers. By doing so, both Son and Ferry confirm the performative nature of texts, particularly writing practice as an effort of social networking to shape intellectual identities.

Additionally, both monographs are based on solid, original archival research. Son's notes on extant editions of Zhang Chao attached at the end of her monograph provide valuable bibliographical information on Zhang's dozens of original editions or reprints in the eighteenth century. Ferry goes in depth into a great variety of newspapers and periodicals, including both serious literary publications and tabloids. She also makes good use of numerous visual images to illustrate the contradictory position of women writers as both consumers and commodities. Particularly in the case of Ding Ling's disappearance and reappearance in public, Ferry exemplifies how renowned left-wing intellectuals almost created a "reading method" to connect the

woman author and her texts as by (mis)interpreting her images. Another example of her detailed archival research is that Ferry notices the woman writer Chen Hengzhe started to write vernacular fiction even before Lu Xun, though the latter took all credits for this revolutionary new genre, leading a pioneering fashion in literature style (p. 85).

Both monographs make significant contributions to the ongoing discovery of the making of text, meaning, and authority with distinctive features in arguments and writing styles. Son's ambitious work, as she describes her purpose, is both a historical study of publishing practices and a literary study of textual meanings and interpretations. She makes many sharp observations, including women's contribution in print culture (pp. 24, 26), distributing printed copies as gift exchange in socializing (p. 40), and the intertwined relations between commercial profit and scholarly reputation (p. 91). More importantly, her research treats both manuscript writing and publishing within the progress of textual production and transmission, bridging the gap between the long manuscript tradition and the early modern printing practice. It is notable that she challenges a static notion of print culture. Before Son, many scholars have pointed out that any printed text is not merely the work of the author, but a collaborative and cumulative product.² Son argues further that printed text is a "fluid and evolving" notion (pp. 6, 42). Instead of the outcome, her research focuses on the *process* of the manuscript tradition and the woodblock printing techniques, during which "readerly interventions, editorial revisions, economic considerations, and political impact" were consistently associated with decision-making (p. 6). In her study of Zhang Chao, Song convincingly demonstrates that instead of increasingly open accessibility of books, writers like Zhang Chao could deliberately set up an exclusive readership by manipulating the processes of production and distribution. She also provides this fascinating example of how the published lines in *Youmengying* (Faint dream shadows, 1681–1697) were constructed within the parodic dialogues between the author's original entry and later comments from several literati readers (pp. 44–46).

More importantly, Son does not limit her research within late imperial China but reaches out to the transregional impact of the two early Qing writers in the eighteenth-century Chōson Korea. She compares censorship in the two empires and the diversified circulation processes of the installed volumes of *Yu Chu xinzhì* (The magician's new records, 1683–1704) and *Tanji congshu* (Collectanea of a sandalwood desk, 1695–1697), illustrating the transmission of texts, knowledge, and ideas across imperial borders. Instead of repeating previous conclusions that censorship aimed at controversial political ideas, Son argues that censorship could also be triggered by the potential anxiety that the imperial court was losing control of the literati's voices. Thus, she provides a different perspective on reevaluating censorship in both Manchu Qing and

Chōson Korea: that censorship could be used not merely as a tool for oppression but as active efforts to (re)establish the political monopoly and to defend cultural boundaries when facing potential dissenting messages in the non-official channels.

Ferry's book provides a detailed and valuable literature review on role models for women in both late imperial and modern China, from talented women of the gentry class to the role model of virtuous wives and benevolent mothers, and from the woman question to Dai Jinhua's latest argument on the "female discourse" as a fabrication. The approach of gender that Ferry picks is quite innovative. Previously, women writers are often described only within a collective picture as participants in modern media, underplaying the brutal reality of their passive representations and daily struggles. Ferry, however, rebels from the myth that print culture is a transformative, liberating, and modernizing power. Instead, based on individual experiences, she argues that in the lens of gender, the role of media is also likely to harm and exploit the femininity of women writers, turning them into a commodity under the male gaze for aesthetical pleasure and refreshment. The way in which Ding Ling was portrayed, for example, produced overlapping and sometimes conflicting images between an iconic martyr for revolutionaries, a seductive symbol of new urban style, and a dutiful woman of traditional family virtues, revealing the paradox in the discourse that women writers were an indicator of modernity.

Meanwhile, Ferry's criticism of the "women category" is indeed thought-provoking. She carefully compares "modern girl" and "new woman," concepts that are often mixed without sufficient consideration. Ferry argues that as a progressive development of the Modern Girl, the New Woman was no longer materialist and emotional but a "motivated, professional, socially engaged and a rational thinker" (p. 64) who "embraced the revolutionary goals" (p. 35). This argument is quite convincing when considering modern women writers such as Ding Ling and how her image was employed among left-wing intellectuals including Qian Xingcun, Shen Congwen, Mao Dun, and Jiang Guangci. In other words, Ferry demonstrates once again how print media helped shape the revolutionary ideology at the cost of women, in a more or less voyeuristic view. Ferry also suggests a new approach to examine women's literature beyond texts and/or authors (p. 10). In her case studies showing how the writing identity was made in public, including prestigious female writers such as Ding Ling, Chen Hengzhe, Feng Yuanjun, Lu Yin, and Xie Bingying, she reveals that by selectively publishing women's private experiences under public spotlight, print media defined and regulated rather than emancipated and facilitated women writers. Additionally, it is valuable to examine the women's own responses and reflections on how they rebelled from conventions. In her detailed investigation, Ferry seeks shared qualities rather than differences among female writers (p. 25). She emphasizes the connection between the conventional

“victim narrative” and the pathetic “wounded attachment” within the (mis) interpretation of women’s writings (p. 85). However, she also portrays how women writers worked with print media in order to act against such victimization and to construct their own networks. With discretion Ferry balances her argument by pointing out that the network building was indeed limited by class consciousness and forces of political orientation and consumerism.

Both Son and Ferry have inspired critical questions for further exploration. Based on her discussion on installments as a popular mode of book production in the seventeenth century, Son stimulates a strong interest in serials in the late imperial and early Republican eras, a unique printing format that is often neglected but deserves a closer examination of its commercial motives and aesthetic values. Her book also gains a new perspective when thinking about the crucial Ming-Qing transition, particularly in the case of Zhang Chao, whose works could be understood as a passive response to the uncertainties among Han literati in early Qing. Ferry critically questions whether there is a unique “women’s literature.” Her approach to the social category of “women writers” through media construction (by highlighting the femininity, etc.) and linguistic signs questions the conventional term, makes us rethink the meaning of women’s writing, and further discloses the power disparities within the institutionalized gender and cultural hierarchies. As previously mentioned, both Song and Ferry suggest in their books the issue of writing practice as performance. However, modern women writers questioned the notion of autobiography and challenged the “collective” identity of women writers (p. 176). On the other hand, instead of focusing solely on writers only, both Son and Ferry emphasize the agency of the readers. In her analysis of the production of *Youmengying*, Son interprets how the contributions of readers “constantly re-creat[e] textual meanings” (p. 51). Ferry, on the other hand, vividly depicts how male intellectuals interpreted images of women writers in multiple ways.

Both Son and Ferry make inspiring discussions and arguments even more meaningful at present. For example, Son notices the discussion of the earliest form of copyright and authorship issues in late imperial China (pp. 97–98) and the debate over self-publishing—a crucial and controversial topic still existing today (p. 58). She also extends her investigations to the appealing connection between late Ming/early Qing publication practice and contemporary academic publishing, or the peer evaluation process (pp. 196–197). Likely, many of Ferry’s findings are indeed thought-provoking in contemporary China. To what extent, she asks, does the print industry today continue the gendered agenda for women writers when media still promotes commodified and sexualized images of beautiful female writers, such as Wei Hui and Mian Mian? Her illustration on gender consciousness and protocols in the print industry since 1980

reminds us of how state-led propaganda attempted to regain control of the discourse on reproductivity in just recent years and make us rethink how women writers address their own physical presence in the male-dominated literary tradition past and present.

Yu Zhang

Yu Zhang is an assistant professor of Chinese at Loyola University Maryland, specializing in literature in late imperial and early Republican China.

NOTES

1. Just to name a few recent publications on print culture in China: Judith T. Zetlin and Lydia H. Liu, eds., *Writing and Materiality in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003); Christopher A. Reed, *Gutenberg in Shanghai: Chinese Print Capitalism, 1876–1937* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2004); Cynthia J. Brokaw and Kai-Wing Chow, eds., *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Dagmar Schafer, ed., *Cultures of Knowledge: Technology in Chinese History* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

2. See, for example, Tobie Meyer-Fong, “The Printed World: Books, Publishing Culture, and Society in Late Imperial China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no. 3 (August 2007): 759–786; Hang Lin, “Intersecting Boundaries: Manuscript, Printing, and Book Culture in Late Ming China,” *Oriens Extremus* 52 (2013): 263–303; Joan Judge, *Print and Politics: “Shibao” and the Culture of Reform in Late Qing China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).