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

During the last two decades, within the field of Chinese studies in Western academia there has been a growing interest in the history of printing in China. Such interest, originally inspired by the research initiated in the mid-1950s by *Annales* historiographers and aimed at detailing the history of the European book, has increasingly evolved in the direction of trying to clarify the specificities of the Chinese case, and in particular the social and cultural history of the book in late imperial China, that is, roughly the period from the mid-sixteenth century to the end of the imperial era at the beginning of the twentieth century. Scholars such as Cynthia Brokaw, Lucille Chia, Kai-wing Chow, Yuming He, Joseph McDermott, among others, have contributed much to this project. As is well-known, printing in China appeared much earlier than the late imperial period, the first printed books having been produced already in the eighth century, and the scale of printing having seen a major development in the Song era. Yet, the period for which we have more detailed information and on which most scholars have so far focused on is the late imperial period, with a special emphasis on the last decades of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries, corresponding to the last segment of the Ming rule. Scholars agree upon the fact that the printing industry in late imperial China reached an unprecedented degree of development; the commercial production and distribution of books and the broadening of the reading audience, thanks also to an increase in literacy in the urban population, are recognized as key factors in this new developmental stage.

Writing for Print, the book by Suyoung Son under review, is a very valuable intervention in the scholarly field I have just sketched, and clear evidence of the high degree of sophistication the study of the late imperial Chinese book has reached. Son's study features a variety of novel approaches and insights. To begin with, in terms of chronology it focuses on the early- and mid-Qing periods, that is, the period going from the middle of the seventeenth- to the end of the eighteenth centuries. Another novel feature of Son's study is that, unlike most scholarship to date that has focused on commercial publishing, it focuses instead on self-publishing, or private publishing. This type of publishing practice, begun in the sixteenth century and become especially popular in the seventeenth century, represents a new cultural phenomenon, in that it implies that authors published their own works while still alive, contrary to the traditional notion of posthumous publication as a basic requirement for a writer's reputation, a notion that saw private publishing as evidence of a distasteful

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self-aggrandizement. At the center of Son's study there are two authors who became prominent private publishers: Zhang Chao, from a wealthy literati family from Huizhou, in Southern Anhui, who though spent most of his life in Yangzhou; and Wang Zhuo, a man from a much less prestigious background, from Hangzhou. Neither Zhang Chao or Wang Zhuo pursued a bureaucratic career, yet they affirmed their literati status and reinforced their reputation through an intense self-publishing activity. As for what they published, they favored miscellanies of casual short prose, a genre known in Chinese as *xiaopin*, or *bagatelles*. This kind of personal essay (championed by major writers such as Yuan Hongdao, Zhang Dai, and Li Yu among others) had become popular already in the late Ming period thanks to the diversification of the book market, and continued to be popular in the early Qing period. Zhang Chao and Wang Zhuo produced a number of very successful collectanea of this sort of essays. Each of the chapters of the book's Part I follows the making of one of their publishing enterprises, such as, for example, *Youmengying* and *Zhaodai congshu*, compiled by Zhang Chao alone, and *Tanji congshu*, jointly compiled by Zhang Chao and Wang Zhuo. In Son's book, generally speaking, the emphasis is placed not so much on the contents of these works, but rather on the way these works were constructed, in other words on the social and cultural contexts of their emergence. In terms of the material they collected, the two authors displayed an inclination toward the contemporary, in that the vast majority of the works they anthologized were by living prestigious writers they actively solicited, exploiting their broad literati networks. In their publishing enterprises, the two authors involved their relatives, literati of their respective local coteries (that is, Yangzhou and Huizhou for Zhang Chao, and Hangzhou for Wang Zhuo, respectively), and literati from other provinces, displaying in so doing remarkable networking and managerial abilities. For example, Zhang Chao managed to obtain the collaboration of prominent figures of the contemporaneous literary and artistic scene of the caliber of Wu Weiye, Zhang Zhupo, Kong Shangren, Gong Xian, Yu Huai, and Zhou Lianggong. Thus, Zhang Chao and Wang Zhuo's role cannot be simply described as that of literary editors. Rather they were also managers who, besides soliciting the submissions of fellow literati authors, took care of purchasing paper and ink, employed the woodblock carvers necessary for the production of xylographic printing, and established relations with potential donors and investors, printers and booksellers. Their networks of coteries spatially increased thanks to their collaboration, extending beyond their respective original localities, to the entire Jiangnan region, the center of late imperial cultural production, and then to the rest of the empire. Since they were confirmed prestigious editors, it increasingly happened that prestigious literati voluntarily submitted their own

writings to them (sending them by mail, whose service had seen major improvements during the seventeenth century). In turn, the editors' prestige increased that of the literati who contributed their writings. In other words, these publishing collaborations secured a profit for all parties involved in terms of reputation. For the editors this profit also had an economic dimension. Speaking of economic profit (the central topic of the the book's third chapter, "The Economics of Print"), it had traditionally been something of a taboo for a literatus, and indeed Zhang Chao and Wang Zhuo, as Son points out, rarely mention such matters and rather try to conceal them instead, ostensibly so as to differentiate their literary products from those of commercial printing. On the relationship between private and commercial publishing, however, Son's study features some novel insights. As she underlines, the fact that not only reputation but also sheer economic profit was at stake in private publishing reinforces the notion that the gap between the latter and commercial publishing was less marked than traditionally thought, the boundary between them having become increasingly porous in the seventeenth century, and financial collaboration between the two sectors having become more frequent and structural. This new form of publishing was no-doubt partly in contrast to commercial publishing, in that it reaffirmed the centrality of the literati elite as authors as well as readers. On the other hand, Son emphasises the complex, complementary (rather than simply oppositional) relationship between private and commercial publishing. After all, the chosen publishing modality of Zhang Chao and Wang Zhuo, that is, publication in installments, Son suggests, responds also to economic needs—gauging readers' interest for a given work, and making sure that the necessary publication funds could be secured through donations and investments from the side of printers and bookshops. The flexibility and open-ended nature of installment publication was perfectly suited to the editors' continuous search for yet more prestigious contributions, as a given work could be republished with the addition of new pieces, or of a variety of paratextual commentarial material, such as prefaces, postfaces, and various other forms of critical apparatus. This paratextual material often occupied a very sizable part of the entire publication, much enhancing its prestige (besides of course the economic profit deriving from its being printed). At the same time, these added commentarial paratexts had also the function of representing the voices of (an albeit highly selected circle of) readers. Hence, Son argues, a compilation of this sort does not consist of a unified text controlled by a central authorial voice, but rather, "it is closer to an impromptu combination of disparate and heterogeneous voices of an author and readers." (p. 44) The tight interweaving of text and commentary that *Youmengying*, for example, champions can even be seen as a "new literary

style" altogether, marked by the integration of the readers' voices into the text, one that implicitly stimulates the response of other readers. Son thus concludes that "the malleable print textuality in this period refuses to identify the text as the final embodiment of authorial intention alone but instead opens the way for the creative agency of readers in shaping the book." (p. 51) As a result, somewhat counter-intuitively, private publishing becomes a complex collective enterprise. As Son, summing up her overall argument in her book's introduction, observes: "In effect, the seventeenth-century writer's printed text was not the exclusive end product of a single author's intention but rather the embodiment of the intersection of more diverse forms of creative agency of readers, commentators, preface writers, financial donors, printers, and booksellers, thereby highlighting the open, collective, and social aspect of textual production and circulation." (p. 6)

The other counter-intuitive argument in Son's study has to do with the relationship between manuscript and printing cultures. The main divide in this regard is of course between Tang and Song culture, given the major development in printing seen during the Song period (let's think of the major publishing enterprises of the Northern Song court and of religious institutions), but manuscript culture was not dead after the Song at all. Even in the late Ming, with the boom of the book market, the manuscript retained an aura of prestige, and will continue to enjoy the favor of bibliofiles and connoisseurs. But Son's original argument is that Zhang Chao and Wang Zhuo's publications finally ended up mimicking the elitist logic that allowed for the manuscript to be valued, creating printed items that vied for a comparable cultural prestige. Both types of texts, after all, targeted a very highly selective elite readership. Moreover, the paratextual material could be added in subsequent installments of a given work, making the new edition a unique piece, hence closer in nature to a manuscript. For this reason, she also notes, such a printing practice overshadows the search for an ultimate first edition—the classic focus of the discipline called "printed editions studies" (*banben xue*), that arose in China in the 1950s.

The book's Part II is entirely focused on the eighteenth century, and is thematically concerned with the state's censorial response to this kind of publishing practices. The main point Son makes is that the imperial censorship targeted books not only on the basis of their content (say, a book containing disparaging comments on the Manchus, or else including authors known for having expressed such ideas elsewhere), but also because of the way these works were created and circulated. She suggests that the Qing state was worried about the expansion of literati self-publishing activities for a number of reasons. One was that these publishing practices reinforced alliances among literati coteries that were even transregional and could thus constitute a

potential threat to central authority. Secondly, installment publications were produced through a process of collaboration between private and commercial publishing, one that the state could not control. Thirdly, in the eyes of the state, their contents verged on fiction (*xiaoshuo*), hence were not reliable. As for this last issue, she points out that although, generally speaking, the Confucian tradition had always "valued historicity over fictionality" (p. 158), even more so in the mid-Qing, the age of "evidential scholarship" (*kaozheng*), printed ideas needed to prove their veracity. For these reasons, Son suggests, none of this type of works were included in the *General Catalog of Books in Four Treasuries* (Siku quanshu), the late eighteenth-century state-sponsored project that was certainly an effort to preserve essential knowledge but was also a censorial project. The works by Zhang Chao did not really contain anti-Qing sentiments, yet they were banned, some in part, some completely. In this sense, in line with Kent Guy's insights, Son revises the simplistic view of censorship as just the result of political conflict between Manchu and Han.

Some of the same censorial criteria listed above appear to also underlie the censorial initiative of the Korean court in 1792, that pointed to the danger of books imported from Qing China for being "trivial and superflous," not by chance singling out *Tanji congshu*, the joint compilation by Zhang Chao and Wang Zhuo. The situation of printing and the circulation of books in Korea was though rather different from that of China, and this is the topic of the book's last chapter, indeed one of the most original and fascinating of the entire work. Here she describes with meticulous detail the transnational transmission of books form China to Korea during the Ming and Qing periods. The preoccupation of the Korean state was enhanced by the fact that book production in the kingdom had always been mostly state sponsored, given that the development of commercial publishing there only began at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The importation of Chinese books thus configures itself in the eyes of the state as a form of competition, "an alternative channel of communication among elites" (p. 167), that threatens its own centralized publishing power, corresponding in turn to the controlled dissemination of orthodox ideology. The conspicuous increase in the importation of Chinese books by members of the Korean tribute missions to Beijing under the Qing is due to the loosening of restrictions these envoys were subjected to compared to the Ming period. While in the Qing capital, the Korean envoys were now free to visit Liuli chang, the most famous book district in Beijing, and buy thousands of books at a time; they also had a chance to become acquainted and exchange ideas and information with Chinese intellectuals. The range of imported books into Korea, as a result, greatly diversified during the eighteenth century, so that novels and *xiaopin* collections (including *Tanji congshu*), letters, etc. entered the country;

this had an impact on Korean writers' prose style and thematic choices. It is no wonder that at the end of the eighteenth century the kingdom proceeded to ban Catholic works together with Chinese fiction and the "trivial" collections of the Ming and Qing, that is, precisely the miscellanies of the sort produced by Zhang Chao and Wang Zhuo, all lumped together under the category of heterodoxy.

Writing for Print is a richly documented and intellectually stimulating study for the wealth of its critical insights and its broad interdisciplinary approach. The book is a contribution not just to the social and economic history of late imperial printing, but also to literary history for the attention to the generic characteristics of the works under consideration, as well as to institutional history for its careful analysis of the censorial response to their circulation, both in Qing China and Joseon Korea. It is finally also a very valuable contribution to a very promising field still unfortunately in its relative infancy, that is, the circulation and impact of Chinese literature in the countries of the East Asian region.

Giovanni Vitiello
Università degli studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", Naples, Italy
gvitiello@unior.it