New Technologies and the Production of Religious Texts in China, 19th–21st Century

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Introduction

The dissemination of religious knowledge has been a key factor in the development of print technologies both in Europe and in China. The earliest printed book is the Dunhuang *Diamond sutra*, dated 868 AD,¹ while Johannes Gutenberg's first major publication project was his famous Bible (1452–54 AD). Of course, printing was even then not limited to religious publishing, though religious concerns at the very least played the role of midwife in the birth of printing in East and West.² This chapter will trace the religious element in the history of the Chinese publishing industry, and conversely, the patterns of media usage in the history of Chinese religions. It is divided into four sections: first, an overview of motivational factors in the use of religious media; second, a brief consideration of religious publishing in the pre-modern period; third, an overview of changes occasioned by the introduction of new technologies and institutions from the late 19th century through the Republican period; fourth, the impact of new media since the second half of the 20th century. The focus will lie on Chinese religions narrowly defined: Daoism, Buddhism, popular sects, and popular religion, i.e. largely excluding other traditions such as Christianity, Islam, and new age movements.

Why Print Religious Texts in Pre-Modern China?

Although the answer to this question may appear self-evident (do not all religions seek to disseminate their teachings as widely as possible?), it is not as obvious as it may first appear. After all, the written word is not the only way to transmit teachings, and it may not even be the preferred way. Thus, oral transmission by means of lectures or small-group instruction is the basic communication channel in social contexts characterized by high levels of illiteracy or by

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specific doctrinal preferences. While the former type of context is somewhat self-explanatory, for the latter we need to pay attention to specific ideational elements. Let us consider just two examples.

First, where a premium is placed on secret transmission, such as of the oral instructions (koujue 口訣) passed on from a Daoist master to his disciple, we are not likely to see much printed material in circulation. The reluctance to make texts widely available also applies in the Daoist setting to texts that (unlike accompanying koujue) are not strictly speaking secret yet constitute part of a priest’s professional stock-in-trade and are passed on from master to disciple. Such disciples are expected to make these texts their own by hand-copying them. Thus, when Michael Saso began to study with “Taoist Master Chuang” in Hsinchu, Taiwan, in the 1960s, this Daoist master was amazed that Saso possessed printed versions of liturgical texts (from the Daoist canon) that circulated among the northern Taiwanese Daoists only in manuscript versions and ostensibly were supposed to be transmitted only in controlled teacher-student-relationships. Hence, in 1960s Taiwan the Daoist Zhengyi 真一 priest hood was basically a manuscript culture not by necessity, but by choice. For a second example, in the Buddhist context, we find similar concerns with secrecy in the Tantric tradition. And in the somewhat different doctrinal context of the Chan 禪 school the direct relationship of master and disciple is also stressed. Here it is not secret knowledge that is passed on, but the experience of enlightenment as arising from the interpersonal encounter of two minds. When the ultimate object of cultivation cannot be found in texts, we can expect considerably lower valuation of the propagation of printed religious publications.

However, these noted instances and conditions were never absolute. While priestly lineages tried to limit the transmission of their liturgical texts in manuscript form, other agents (of the state, higher echelons of the Zhengyi and Quanzhen 全真 clergy, as well as individuals with systematizing interests) had them printed up in large collections. They did so for various reasons, notably as patronage, for prestige, scholarship, or as part of efforts to standardize ritual. Moreover, the notion of Chan bibliophobia has long ago been debunked as having been more an ideological claim than a social reality, especially since voluminous collections of masters’ sayings were not only published, but also were actually assiduously studied by aspiring novices ever since the Song dynasty. My point here is to stress that an intrinsic

4 On religious manuscript culture, see also James Robson, “Brushes with some ‘dirty truths’: handwritten manuscripts and religion in China,” History of Religions 51.4 (2012), 317–43.