Yuming He


The Ming period is renowned in the history of the Chinese book for the prominence of commercial book publishing and the breadth and scope of imprints produced. However, not all books that were held in high favour by Ming readers continued to circulate during the later imperial period. This is particularly true for popular books of drinking songs, games, jokes, household manuals, encyclopedias, and dramatic arias. In *Home and the world*, Yuming He has made an expert contribution to our knowledge of these ‘unorthodox’ books and in so doing has greatly enhanced our understanding of the function of books to what could broadly be called ‘the social arts’ of living amongst the middle to upper strata in China of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In the Introduction, Dr He notes that editors of the *Siku quanshu* (Complete Library of the Four Treasures) and other members of the Qing elite, commonly derided Ming publishing in general and and popular books in particular. Lower order commercial texts were scorned as ‘hucksterish’ *baifan* (稗販), a term that suggests the peddling of weeds, or the marketing of inferior imitations to gullible readers. In line with previous scholarship on Ming vernacular and entertainment works, she seeks here to ascertain what made these works so popular in their own era. This takes her on an often exuberant exploration of the materiality of the Ming imprint as she uncovers the constant mutual borrowing and interaction apparent at the level of the woodblock, the ways these texts were read and enjoyed, and most of all, the social world reflected in these popular texts, a world which often turns out to be just as ‘hucksterish’ as the imprints themselves.

Chapter one deals with a text called ‘Pearls to evoke laughter’ (*Boxiao zhuji* 博笑珠璣), which is described here as a ‘mishmash of riddles, jokes and drinking games’ (p. 17). It is also marred by ‘low production quality, muddled pedigree [and] copious transcription errors’ (p. 17). While some might be tempted to regard this type of text as a sloppily-made pastiche, He Yuming seeks to persuade us that the producers of the text (the word ‘author’ seems too strong here) had no ‘interest in preserving a textual authenticity or legitimacy’ but rather intended to produce ‘a playful text’ full of irony and wit to delight the reader (p. 17). It is a testament to Dr He’s analytical skills that she largely succeeds in demonstrating the qualities that made the *Boxiao zhuji* so inviting to Ming readers. Clearly, one needed a certain amount of education to make use of the *Boxiao zhuji*. The riddles and jokes here relied on a knowledge of basic primers.
such as the Poems by a thousand masters (Qian jia shi 千家詩) and the classical texts required for the examination system (such as the Confucian Analects). In addition, the reader needed to be familiar with the Great Ming code (Da Ming lü 大明律), as it provides a constant reference point in the Boxiao zhuji. One good example of her insightful analysis is the treatment of a verbal game that requires matching of a line from The Poems by a thousand masters with a parallel expression from the Great Ming code. The outcome is often witty and comical, as in this example: ‘A moment of springtime is worth a thousand in gold’ from the poetry anthology, matched with this tongue-in-cheek response from the Great Ming code, ‘raising the price [unduly]’. This refers to ‘price-gouging’, an offence punishable under Ming law (p. 25). As He points out, the ubiquitous references to the Great Ming code in books of this type indicates the spread of legal learning to wider circles of the populace. It is also an indication that ‘hucksterish’ books were valued by their target readership not just for their wit and humor but also because they afforded readers the opportunity to test their skill in areas of practical knowledge. The Boxiao zhuji contains an intriguing blend of classical language and vernacular. Some games called for the reader to ‘code-switch’ between a line of classical poetry and expressions of ‘common speech’ (suyu 俗語), including popular ‘folksy’ expressions. As He explains, the comic juxtaposition of the vulgar and the classical can at times be ‘mocking and subversive’ (p. 50). She provides the example of a riddle: ‘Father-in-law and daughter-in-law share the same bath’, to which the answer comes from The Analects: ‘Wishing to maintain his personal purity, he spoils the great relation’. The latter actually refers to a man who refused to take up an official position. Here this well-known dictum is used to allude to immoral sexual relations within the home.

Drama miscellanies are discussed in Chapter Two. These hybrid texts, comprising dramatic arias, popular songs, jokes and drinking games have also been studied intensively by Kathryn Lowry in The Tapestry of popular songs in 16th- and 17th-century China: reading, imitation, and desire (Brill, 2005). Dr He chooses to focus on the reading practices associated with these texts. One of the most interesting sections of this chapter is her discussion of ‘dialect’ or non-standard speech. She claims that the use of the vulgar language ‘evokes the world of the jianghu 江湖 (rivers and lakes)’ (p. 87) which, she believes, operates here as ‘a parallel universe to the state’ (p. 88). Cover illustrations are mined for clues to how Ming contemporaries viewed private theatrical performances.

Chapter three covers a wide range of texts to investigate the phenomenon of borrowing, replication and adaptation in woodblock printing of popular texts. Whereas bibliophiles have traditionally regarded these practices as odious