Philip Clart and Gregory Adam Scott, eds.


This edited volume originated with a panel at the 2011 American Academy of Religion congress, but includes new contributions. Indeed, editors Clart and Scott must be complemented for their remarkable work identifying the best authors in the field, meticulously translating two chapters from Chinese into flowing English, carefully editing the whole and finally writing a fine introduction that cogently places the contributions of the seven chapters in the larger field of book history. The result is important because it opens new ground. Chinese religious publishing has mostly been studied for earlier periods of imperial history, while the recent flurry of studies on the modern press, which is duly referenced and used in the present volume, tends to strongly focus on the supposedly secular aspects of modernity (newspapers, politics, the modern novel, etc.). Yet, this volume shows how religious groups, and religious ideas loomed large in the books, journals and other printed material that came out of traditional woodblock, lithographic, and movable type presses from the late Qing to the Communist takeover. Readers not familiar with modern Chinese religion will probably be amazed by the sheer variety, amount and general effervescence of religious publications during this period. Although it is too early in terms of available databases and catalogues to give a quantified general picture, we are dealing here with hundreds of publishers of all types, and several tens of thousands of publications (this volume mostly deals with books). On the other hand, those familiar with the recent swell of research on the religious creativity of the Republican period, will be less surprised, but equally fascinated by the rich material and the comparative perspectives.\(^1\)

The seven chapters deal with various religious traditions, time periods, and issues. George Kam Wah Mak discusses the most basic mechanism for distributing Bibles in post-Opium War China, colportage. Based on rich archival and internal material from Bible societies (primarily the British and Foreign Bible Society), he shows how this society’s economic model (training local converts

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to sell the Bibles at low prices) had a shaky start but eventually built up steam to reach over a million distributed copies by the early twentieth century. Joseph Tse-Hei Lee and Christie Chui-Shan Chow look at Adventists and their specific model of distributing religious literature (often focusing on other Christians rather than ‘pagans’), as it evolved from the early twentieth century to the present. Gregory Adam Scott represents the vast world of modern Buddhist publishing with a chapter that focuses on innovative (yet in many ways grounded in earlier traditions) primers and dictionaries published by one of the giants of Shanghai publishing, Ding Fubao 丁福保 (1874-1952). Rostislav Berezkin examines the publication of vernacular stories embedded in Jiangnan local culture, the baojuan 宝卷, and shows that while lithographic editions enlarged the market to solo readers, these books continued to be strongly linked to performers and local ritual life. Yau Chi-on (You Zian) discusses a network of temples and publishers belonging to the fast-expanding network of Xiantiandao 先天道 devotional tradition in the Cantonese world, showing how the businessmen that formed the leadership of this dynamic tradition established both temples and presses with blurred boundaries between religion and business. Wang Chien-ch’uan puts forward the argument (also present in Yau’s work) that it is the morality press publishers 善書局, a type of publisher they see emerging from the mid-nineteenth century onward, that have played the greatest role in ‘legalizing’ the devotional, ‘sectarian’ traditions, gradually moving them and their ideas from the realm of the ‘sects’ repressed by the Qing state to that of very open, established religions during the Republican period. He does that by focusing on the case of the Mingshan shuju 明善書局, a major Shanghai morality books publisher that had very close links to the redemptive society Tongshanshe 同善社. Finally, Paul R. Katz takes up the same case study (Mingshan shuju) but from a different angle, comparing its business model and the contents of its rich catalogues to those of other presses.

All chapters are richly documented and path-breaking in their own right. Yet, the whole is also greater than the sum of its parts, and gives a sense of a huge field probably beyond the reach of a single scholar. The editors were able to achieve this because of two highly commendable choices. First, they defined religion in the most useful, that is, broadest sense, encompassing not only officially-defined religions, but more largely value systems. The reason for this is obvious when one reads the chapters and browses through the catalogues and lists included therein; for the Chinese then (and now), there is a continuum from Buddhist, Confucian and Daoist scriptures to self-cultivation, morality and medical books. All these serve to improve people, in both their this-worldly lives and their afterlives. These genres (scriptures, morality books, self-cultivation and medicine) mix, both within collections and