Xu Jingbo 许静波


Historians and bibliophiles of the Chinese book have not been unfamiliar with late-Qing and Republican Shanghai’s lithography industry. However, until now, the industry has not served as the exclusive subject of a book-length historical inquiry either in Chinese or in Western languages. Xu Jingbo’s vacuum-filling work thus gives readers who are interested in the history of Chinese book, print culture, as well as ‘Shanghai studies’, a valuable opportunity to understand this significant cultural industry at close range. As Xu defines it, the subject of this study, Shanghai’s modern lithographic book industry, refers to book publishing activities, not periodicals, advertisements, or other ephemera. The publications on which he focuses were produced mainly using mose shiyin (墨色石印 black-and-white lithographic printing) and were produced solely by private publishing houses (p. 12).

Xu innovatively exploits ‘cost’ (chengben 成本) as an analytical category. Doing so enables him to discuss a range of variables shaping the operations of Shanghai lithographic book publishers, including financing, knowledge, business organization, and governmental regulations. The book examines various historical agencies, including Western missionaries and Chinese publishers, their scholar-editors and apprentices, the Shanghai shuye gong suo (上海書業公所 Shanghai booksellers’ guild), along with evolving lithographic technologies.

The first chapter outlines a concentrated overview of Shanghai’s lithographic book publishing from 1843 to 1956. Xu’s account starts with Robert Morrison and Walter Henry Medhurst’s printing practices in Southeast Asia and ends at the nationalization of the industry in 1956. The chapter divides this survey history into four stages. The first stage features the missionaries’ operation from 1843 to 1878, which, Xu opines, laid the material foundation for the industry. The second stage (1878-1905) characterizes the booming years of the lithographic industry fueled by the demands of the civil service examination market. The next stage (1905-1949) sees a dwindling but surviving lithographic practice after the education reforms in 1905.

Xu’s most valuable contribution to the current understanding of the history of the Shanghai lithographic book publishing industry is the discussion of the fourth, post-1949 stage. Xu argues persuasively that socialization after the early 1950s significantly altered the practices of lithographic publishers in two veins,
ownership and practice. Besides nationalizing the businesses, the new socialist policy in 1950 divided editing, printing, and distribution into three different government-managed systems, says Xu. This new institution forced many lithographic publishers to transform their comprehensive practices (including all three under one roof) into retail and distributary offshoots of Xinhua Bookstores (p. 79).

Although Xu’s book should be praised for its analysis of the lithography industry after 1949, its discussion of a pivotal moment for the industry in 1905 could be more nuanced. Xu makes the strong point that the contents of the examination aids, which he describes as ‘ancient books’ (gu ji 古籍), were a major factor that undermined the sales of lithographic prints after the abolition of the civil service examination in 1905 (57). However, Xu overlooks an important reform of the examination in 1901 when the bagu 八股 essay was dropped while questions relating to Western learning and diplomatic policy entered the examination. According to Shen Junping’s relatively recent research, Shanghai’s lithographic publishers reacted swiftly to the court’s announcement of the new exam curriculum. They produced plenty of books on Western politics, history, and geography for exam candidates. The majority of the titles in Western learning bibliography (Xixue shumu dawan 西學書目答問), an official bibliography for Western-learning books issued by the Guizhou Xuezheng (貴州學政 Guizhou Provincial Director of Education) in 1901, had lithographic editions by then. As reported by Shen Junping, many of those books were published by Shanghai lithographic publishers. Shen’s findings suggest that, at least by 1901, the Shanghai lithographic industry was not married to any particular texts. Rather, its vulnerability lay in its close relationship with the exam system itself.

Supplemented by an appendix probing the importation of printing machines and other printing supplies, the second chapter surveys lithographic technologies documented by print media from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Discussion includes John Fryer’s Chinese Scientific Magazine 格致彙編, Shenbao, and many other commercial magazines. Xu creatively employs Zhang Yuanji’s journal to discuss the Commercial Press’s lithographic operation from 1916 to 1919. Zhang detailed the purchases of machines and paper and the need for lithographic printers in his journal and thus gives historians some clues suggesting the scale of the publisher’s lithographic

---

1 Shen Junping, ‘Wanqing shiyin juye yongshu de shengchan yu liutong’, Zhongguo wenhua yanjiusuo xuebao 57 (July 2013): 258-266.
2 Shen Junping, pp. 260-263.