Michaela Bussotti and Jean-Pierre Drège, eds.


Imprimer sans profit? is an edited volume in eighteen chapters, ten in English and eight in French, plus an introduction in French. Some chapters were translated from Chinese by Bussotti, Drège, Pierre-Henri Durand, and Jérome Kerlouegnan. Most chapters are revised versions of papers presented at a conference of the same name held at the Institut nationale d’histoire de l’art in Paris in 2009. The chapters are arranged chronologically, covering the period from the eighth to the twentieth centuries. This review, however, will group essays by topic where appropriate.

The introduction situates the volume in the literature on Chinese and European book history. The editors explain that in the last twenty years the history of the Chinese printed book has expanded rapidly. Early studies focused on the history of print technology, bibliography, and collections, while recent studies more often address the social history of the book, especially that related to commercial editions. The focus on commercial editions arose from the desire to engage scholarship on early European printing, which was closely tied to the market. In China, historians influenced by social sciences examined the roles of merchants, markets, and consumption. This volume is needed, the editors correctly argue, because many Chinese books were not produced with a commercial logic. Revisiting the literature on European book history in light of Chinese experience can lead to productive comparisons.

Not-for-profit publishing included a wide range of genres. Buddhist images and texts that were printed to acquire merit played an important role in the early development of printing. Editions of Confucian classics, religious books, dynastic histories, and other genres were printed to demonstrate prestige and power. Some were disseminated to the entire empire, while others circulated in narrow regions. Local families and institutions printed non-commercial books such as genealogies and temple gazetteers.
The line between commercial and non-commercial is often unclear. Scholars who published books may have needed the income from selling their books, and Buddhist texts produced for religious merit were sold. It was not, the editors explain, that earlier research had not addressed various types of non-commercial books, however ‘non-commercial’ had not been recognized from a theoretical and methodological approach. By doing so in this volume, the editors hope to make it possible for us to better appreciate the nuances, changes, and ambiguities in book printing and publishing, including both commercial and non-commercial motivations.

The editors explain that their use of term ‘non-commercial’ is derived from the long-standing Chinese classification of books as ‘imperial’, ‘governmental’, ‘private’, ‘institutional’, or ‘commercial’. The books addressed in this volume are those in all but the last category. Studying them allows the contributors to examine all of the book crafts at all levels: an individual, a family, an academy, a monastery, a prefectural school, a princely or imperial court, etc. This theme also allows the contributors to reflect on the roles that various organizations had in publishing and printing in China, while not precluding the parallel presence of commercial production and a book market.

Chapters by Jean-Pierre Drège, Chen Jie, and Lucille Chia examine religious printing. In ‘Des charmes aux canons (viiiie-xie siècles)’, Jean-Pierre Drège notes the likely origins of the printed book in eighth-century Buddhist charms and dhāraṇī printed on small paper rolls that were put inside stupas in China, Korea, and Japan. Drège emphasizes that all the early indications of wood-block printing are in a Buddhist context, and we can assume that early wood-block printing was not market oriented. Instead, he argues, it was simply about multiplication of texts and images for religious reasons. Installed in stupas and statues, these texts represented the words of the Buddha and became objects of worship. Early dhāraṇī were dispersed among the faithful, put up on walls, deposited alongside the dead, and worn on the bodies of the living, to protect the person, absolve transgressions, heal the ill, bring about victories, peace, and joy.

Drège argues that even though the value of the charms and sutras was symbolic, their production as printed objects went through a market-like system of exchange. It is likely that the sheet bearing a dhāraṇī, whether printed in a monastery, or made by a professional copyist, monk, or layman, was acquired by a devotee who gave an offering to the Buddhist community. The symbolic value did not exclude the market value, on the contrary it was implied.

Printing did nothing but accelerate the production of these texts. If the cost was too large, the faithful could be grouped together, and each donated to printing one or more leaves. In terms of production, there was no radical dif-