
This volume is a welcome addition to a burgeoning scholarly literature on morality books (shanshu 善書) and other devotional literature from the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911) to the communist revolution in 1949. By placing religion at the center of the transformative processes of modernity, the contributors provide a more complex picture of continuity and change than that offered by the secularization model prominent in the historiography of modern China. The volume successfully foregrounds the creativity of religious actors while advancing the insights of the field of the history of the book and printing in China, which has garnered so much scholarly attention over the last decade. Contributors range from established experts to promising young scholars; together their interests will shape the field for decades to come.

The jointly authored introduction draws on coeditor Gregory Adam Scott’s excellent 2013 dissertation to provide a concise overview of the scholarly use of the term “print culture” and the indigenous characteristics of East Asian society that demand significant modifications of the concepts developed by Europeanists. In assessing the impact of new printing technologies the editors opt for the rhetoric of revolution pioneered by Elisabeth Eisenstein, though several contributors stress continuity more than the stark tradition-modernity dichotomy such language implies. This introduction extends temporally to the Republican period (1912–1949), rather than the claim made in the title to cover to the present day. The significance of the difference lies most obviously in the volume’s failure to address digital publishing, although coeditor Philip Clart has done so extensively elsewhere.1

Particularly welcome is the present volume’s contribution to the scholarship on late Qing publishing; until the last decade there had been a dearth of research on publishing in the late Qing, especially when measured against the voluminous literature on printing in Republican Shanghai (as well as Taishō and early Showa Tokyo, and, most recently, Seoul under Japanese occupation). The Chinese print history narrative, as inherited from late imperial times, was characterized by two peaks: the Northern Song and the mid-Ming. Whether a given author focused on aesthetics, technical innovations, or editorial rigor, the late Qing was viewed as a period of decline and received scant attention. Frequently it was not even addressed at all, as in Inoue Susumu’s 井上進 landmark study Chūgoku shuppan bunkashi: Shomotsu sekai to chi no fūkei 中国出版文化史：書物世界と知の風景 (A Cultural History of Chinese Publishing: Books and the Landscape of Knowledge, 2002). Yet, as in the field of print history more broadly, it is hardly the case that religion has been ignored. Sakai Tadao’s 酒井忠夫 monumental Chūgoku zensho no kenkyū 中国善書の研究 (Studies of Chinese morality books, 1960), published in a revised and expanded two-volume edition in 1999–2000 (with a full Chinese translation in 2010), provided the solid intellectual and bibliographical foundation upon which these contributions build. The chapters on Christianity in the volume under review supply a welcome Chinese perspective on the publishing activities of American and European missionaries.

Brief comments on each of the seven chapters will convey the scope of the volume. The first chapter focuses on the nuts and bolts of Chinese-language Bible distribution at the high point of Protestant missionary activity, from approximately the beginning of the nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth. Drawing on the publications of the British and Foreign Bible Society, George Kam Wah Mak argues for the crucial role played by Chinese itinerant distributors, or colporteurs. He paints a vivid portrait of those Chinese converts the American missionary Watts Pye optimistically dubbed “the vanguard of the Christian army of occupation” (48). Mak’s article raises intriguing questions regarding Europeans’ deliberate scrambling of existing market networks. In a London Missionary Society report of 1873, colporteur employer E.J. Eitel described how he compelled his Chinese subalterns to travel via strenuous inland routes rather than on “large waterways in a snug boat”—channels that had already been exploited by Western missionaries. This labor-intensive trawling of low-end market networks invites comparison with Cynthia Brokaw’s studies of the publishing centers of Sibao, Fujian, and Yuechi, Sichuan.