

REVIEW ARTICLE

FOUNDATIONS OF LITERACY IN PREMODERN CHINA: A NEW STUDY OF BOOK CULTURE IN THE QING AND REPUBLICAN PERIODS

Yasushi Oki

The University of Tokyo

E-mail oki@ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp

Commerce in Culture: The Sibao Book Trade in the Qing and Republican Periods.

By Cynthia J. Brokaw. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007. Pp. 673.

ISBN 10: 0674024494; 13: 978-0674024496.

I can remember clearly my excitement upon hearing Professor Cynthia Brokaw present on the Sibao publishing business at a workshop on Chinese book culture she organized in 1997 at Mt Hood in Oregon. Prior to that meeting and in the years that followed she published a series of papers on materials related to this topic.¹ Now, at long last, Brokaw has published an enormous (almost 700-page) volume, a monument to the unprecedented research she has conducted in the field of Chinese book culture. From the start, I would like to express my profound respect for her work, and congratulate her on this publication.

One of the things that surprised me when I first heard her presentation at Mt Hood was the level of detail available regarding the premodern Chinese bookstore. Publishing in Japan during the Edo period generated many documents to do with applications and permissions, a by-product of the strict control exerted by the Tokugawa government. In Japan, the colophon of each book published typically contained bibliographical information such as the publisher, publisher's address, date of publication, names of book agents and the like. Compared with Japanese books, bibliographical information of premodern Chinese books typically carries much less detail. Furthermore, in premodern Chinese books the name of the publisher and the date of publication sometimes were put on the verso of the title page. Because the covers of Chinese books (most commonly bound by the *xianzhuang* 線裝 method) were quite flimsy, the crucial information contained on the title page was easily

1 Cynthia Brokaw, "Commercial Publishing in Late Imperial China: The Zou and Ma Family Businesses of Sibao, Fujian", *Late Imperial China* 17:1 (June 1996), pp. 49–92; "Reading the Best-sellers of the Nineteenth Century: Commercial Publishing in Sibao", in Cynthia Brokaw and Kai-wing Chow, eds., *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, pp. 184–231.

lost. For this reason, it is no easy task to collect materials on premodern Chinese publishing or bookstores.

Several kinds of book catalogues have been published, such as Du Xinfu's *Mingdai banke zonglu* (*General Catalogue of Ming Publications*) and Yang Shengxin's *Zhongguo banke zonglu* (*General Catalogue of Chinese Publications*). For researchers, these are of great utility.² Through them we can understand which bookstore published what kind of books at what time. Still, it is quite difficult for us to learn through books alone the circumstances of relations between authors and bookstores, the process of book production, and the market and circulation of books. Our image and understanding of the business of premodern Chinese bookstores has long been fragmentary and incomplete.

Given these circumstances, I was astonished that we could possess such intimate detail about bookstores in the single Fujian township of Sibao 四堡. In present-day China there are about 2,834 counties (縣 *xian*) and about 44,800 townships (鄉 *xiang*). Sibao, located in the mountains of western Fujian, is one of these townships. This township, nowadays known to few, flourished as a great publishing center from the late seventeenth through the early twentieth century. The books published there not only circulated locally but also reached other areas such as Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Hubei and Hunan. The sphere of circulation of Sibao books, in other words, covered almost all of south China.

Prior studies of the history of Chinese publishing have taken notice of Sibao. For example, in his 1989 discussion of commercial publishing in the Qing Dynasty, Zhang Xiumin quotes the following sentences from *Linting Huikao* 臨汀匯考, by Yang Lan 楊瀾:

All the people in the town of Sibao in Changting 長汀 prefecture engage in the book business, and have printing blocks in their houses. Every year they print the texts required by students of the classics and model examination essays. They sell them at places near and far. These books are called "Sibao books".³

Scholars Xie Shuishun and Li Ting devote twenty pages of their *Fujian gudai keshu* to an explanation of Sibao publishing.⁴ They make use of Zou and Ma genealogies, introduce publishers of the Zou and Ma families, and discuss the management of bookstores by the families and what books they published. Theirs may be the longest discussion of Sibao publishing prior to the appearance of Brokaw's work.

Fujian as a whole actually was known for publishing since the Song Dynasty. Lucille Chia's study of Jianyang publishing, published in 2002, provided detailed depictions of Jianyang commercial publishing, especially from the eleventh to the seventeenth century.⁵

2 Du Xinfu 杜信孚, *Mingdai banke zonglu* 明代版刻綜錄, Yangzhou: Jiangsu Guangling Guji Keyin she, 1983; and Yang Shengxin 楊繩信, ed., *Zhongguo banke zonglu* 中國版刻綜錄, Xi'an: Shanxi Renmin Chuban she, 1987.

3 Zhang Xiumin 張秀民, *Zhongguo yinshua shi* 中國印刷史 [A History of Chinese Printing], Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chuban she, 1989, p. 558 (*juan* 4).

4 Xie Shuishun 謝水順 and Li Ting 李珽, *Fujian gudai keshu* 福建古代刻書 [Premodern Publishing in Fujian], Fuzhou: Fujian Renmin Chuban she, 1997.

5 Lucille Chia, *Printing for Profit: The Commercial Publishers of Jianyang, Fujian (11th–17th Centuries)*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002.

As she notes, the business of Jianyang bookstores declined because of a disastrous fire at the beginning of the Qing. However, Sibao goes unmentioned in Chia's study. In short, Sibao was not a place previous scholars knew about nor were necessarily interested in – put another way, Chia's and Brokaw's studies together form a remarkable composite of the history of publishing in Fujian.

Brokaw's research on Sibao publishing is definitely pioneering work. She visited Sibao and gained access to local documents preserved in villages such as genealogies, property-division lists, account books and woodblocks. As she explains:

The richest sources for the study of Sibao publishing are to be found on site, in [the villages of] Wuge and Mawu. Genealogies of several Zou branch lineages and one Ma branch lineage make possible the reconstruction of relationships among some of the most prominent publishers; they also provide relatively detailed information about the origins and development of the business and even, to some extent, about the titles the Zou and Ma published (and edited). (p. 20)

In this research the most important sources were the genealogies of the Zou and Ma families in Sibao involved in the publishing business generation after generation.

Quite simply speaking, over the past hundred years Japanese scholars of Chinese history and society first made use of source materials such as “authentic histories” (正史 *zhengshi*), then moved on to local gazetteers (方志 *fangzhi*), and at last used genealogies (族譜 *zupu*). In such a way we gradually deepened our understanding of Chinese local society. As we progressed from the historical records to genealogies, our view of Chinese society became increasingly precise.

Regarding the use of genealogies, I recall the example of the Huang lineage in Anhui, whose family produced many woodblock cutters during the late Ming and early Qing period. This genealogy explained times at which one of the family members moved to a place where (during the late Ming) the publishing business was flourishing, such as Nanjing, Suzhou and Hangzhou.⁶ In the case of Sibao publishing, genealogies provide detailed information about Zou and Ma family members who engaged in the publishing business for successive generations. They also supply information about the nature of publishing as a household industry.

Important to the research of book culture is learning about aspects of production, circulation and content. The first stage in book production was manuscript preparation: it was likely the master of the bookstore who decided what kind of book the bookstore would publish. After deciding, he would ask the author or editor to prepare the manuscript. If the master was also was a man of letters, he might prepare the manuscript himself. The next stage was that of printing: first a transcription of the text was made, then blocks were cut, after which the printing and binding took place. How the finished books were sold was a question of the market and circulation, centering on the interaction between bookstores and readers. Market viability inevitably was related to book content. When the master of the bookstore was considering whether to publish a book, he had to have

6 See Zhou Wu 周芜 ed., *Huipai banhua shi lunji* 徽派版画史论集, Hefei: Anhui Renmin Chubanshe, 1983, pp. 19–25.

in mind a target readership. Each book that we endeavor to understand requires that all of these dimensions be examined. Using Sibao bookstores as her focal point, Brokaw has undertaken to examine the multiple dimensions of production, circulation and book content. As she herself explains:

This study is divided into two parts, the first (“The Business of Book Publishing and Bookselling in Sibao”) on the structure and organization of the publishing-bookselling business of Sibao; the second (“Sibao Imprints”) on the texts that these businesses printed and sold and their place in Qing and early Republican society. Understanding the role of the Sibao book trade in Chinese society and culture requires study both of the context and process of book production and sale *and* of the contents and material quality of the books produced. My goal is twofold: to describe and analyze the organization of the *business* of publishing in Sibao and the influence it had on what books were produced and how they were produced; and to characterize as fully as the evidence allows the *products* of Sibao publishing and the impact they had on Chinese book culture and society. (p. 29)

As such, the framework of her study covers thoroughly the crucial issues of production, circulation and content regarding Sibao publications.

Part I, “The Business of Book Publishing and Bookselling in Sibao”, begins with Chapter 2, “The Setting: Minxi and Sibao”, in which Brokaw introduces Sibao’s geographical location and the cultural and historical background of the area. A point of interest here is that the area of Sibao, historically, was heavily populated by the Hakka 客家 people. Many of the publishers and booksellers in Sibao, including the Zou and the Ma family, were Hakka. The Hakka connection played a significant role in the business of book trade in southeast China.

Chapter 3, “The Origins of Publishing and the Production of Books in Sibao”, concerns the beginning of publishing in the villages of Wuge and Mawu. Brokaw gives an historical overview of the area’s bookstores, positing the beginning of publishing business there at the time of Zou Mengchun (1619–1672) or Ma Weihai (1639–1700), that is, the early Qing period. Genealogies are an especially effective source in this chapter. No other study of booksellers has given us as vivid an image as Brokaw’s. In this chapter she also introduces step-by-step the production of books in Sibao, discussing natural resources (wood and paper), woodblocks, block cutters, cutting, printing, binding and ink. At the end of the chapter she concludes:

In sum, the Zou and Ma publishers “specialized” in the manufacture of cheap texts, profiting from their ability to keep labor costs down through the employment of household members as well as from the assured popularity of their offerings and the lack of competition in poor hinterland areas. (p. 124)

This is a crucial point to note about Sibao publishing.

In Chapter 4, “The Structure of the Sibao Publishing Industry”, the author examines the form of management and the economic structure of a typical household industry. In Chapter 5, “‘We Are All Brothers’: Household Division, the Proliferation of Publishing

Houses, and the Management of Competition”, Brokaw relates the Sibao bookstores’ strategy of development. New publishers in Sibao already enjoyed membership in established families. Inheritance and the division of woodblocks and printing workrooms among male siblings guaranteed the continuity of their business from generation to generation. The author introduces a form of rules observed by the Sibao bookstores that prohibited them from letting outsiders use their woodblocks, which were among their most important property. The lists of rental prices for woodblocks Brokaw presents here are of particular interest.

About the household management of publisher-booksellers, I would like to add a comment. Chinese bookstores in fact seem to have been run for quite some time in the way Brokaw describes. In Chapter 13 of the Qing novel *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史 by Wu Jingzi 吳敬梓, the character Ma Chun-shang, expert of the eight-legged essays for civil service examinations, edits a selection of eight-legged essays at the *Wenhai lou* 文海樓 (Literary Ocean) Bookshop in Jiaying. After finishing that work, he leaves Jiaying for Hangzhou. In Chapter 14, Wu Jingzi narrates:

Ma Chun-shang arrived at Duanhetou 斷河頭 (Broken Bay) in Hangzhou, where he asked his way to the *Wenhan lou* 文瀚樓 (Literary Expanse) Bookshop, which was run by a family member of the *Wenhai lou* Bookshop. [translation mine]

Later, in Chapter 18, the master of the Literary Expanse Bookshop says, “When Mr. Ma stayed in my brother’s bookstore . . .”, a statement that shows that the masters of the Literary Expanse Bookshop in Hangzhou and the Literary Ocean Bookstore in Jiaying are brothers. This is one example of family management.

A further example is Feng Menglong 馮夢龍, a late Ming literatus. Feng seemed to have close relations with the Ye family in Suzhou, and published his books with the Ye family bookstores: his *Chunqiu Hengku* 春秋衡庫 (*The Secret Clue to the Spring and Autumn*) was published by Ye Kunchi 葉昆池, *Rumiantan* 如面談 (*Like Interviewing*) by Ye Bishan 葉碧山, *Gujin tangai* 古今譚概 (*Anecdotes Old and New*) by Ye Kunchi 葉昆池, *Xin lieguo zhi* 新列國志 (*New History of the Countries*) by Ye Jingchi 葉敬池, *Xingshi hengyan* 醒世恆言 (*Constant Words to Awaken the World*) by Ye Jingchi 葉敬池 and Ye Jingxi 葉敬溪. As almost all of them have the same character in their personal names, we can surmise that they all belong to the same generation of one family. In other words, the household industry, in practice, has been around for a long time. For that matter, household management was present not only in the book trade but also in most other lines of work. Far from being unique, bookstores in Sibao in fact conformed to the basic pattern of Chinese occupations. Brokaw’s contribution is that she has given us detailed information on bookstore manifestations of the household industry.

In Chapter 6, “Sibao Bookselling Routes”, Brokaw examines the market for books published in Sibao. The families had bookselling sites in Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, Jiangxi, Hubei and Hunan, a surprisingly large range of selling sites across south China for mountain book publishers.

Chapter 7, “Sojourning Bookselling and the Operation of the Branch Shops”, examines the marketing strategy of branch shops outside Sibao. In Chapter 8, “Sibao’s ‘Confucian Merchants’ in Minxi Society and the Late Imperial Economy”, the author explains the

character of bookstore operators as Confucian merchants. The example is Mr Cai, master of a bookstore in Nanjing that appears in *Peach Blossom Fan*, which I will quote later.

Part II, “Sibao Imprints”, opens with Chapter 9, “The Nature and Sources of Sibao Imprints”, a general survey of books published in Sibao. Brokaw divides the materials into three categories: “educational works”, “guides to good manners, health, and fortune”, and “fiction and belles-lettres”. In Chapter 10 she treats educational works such as *Sanzi jing* 三字經, *Baijia xing* 百家姓, *Qianzi wen* 千字文, texts of Tang poetry, the Four Classics, and texts for eight-legged essays for civil service examinations. Chapter 11 takes up guides to good manners and health, and fortune such as encyclopedias for daily use (日用類書 *riyong leishu*), as well as medical and pharmaceutical manuals, guides to good fortune such as *fengshui*, divination manuals, and morality books.

In Chapter 13, “Sibao’s Customer and Popular Textual Culture in the Qing”, the author explains:

The Zou and Ma publisher-booksellers were, for the most part, offering texts of assured popularity largely to readers who hoped to achieve or had achieved literacy sufficient to obtain *shengyuan* (licentiate) status. Of course, their readers might also include highly literate scholars, officials, and merchants. But accounts of their customers in the Zou and Ma genealogies, present-day informant, the logic of the markets for their books, the nature of their output, and, as we shall see, the price of their books, allow us to infer their primary intended audience: at the top, low-ranking officials and local literati; then in the middle a large and miscellaneous group of students, merchants, artisans, and village specialists; and, at the bottom, literate (or even semi-literate) peasants and traders of moderate means eager for education or recreation for themselves and their families. (p. 513)

Earlier, in Chapter 3, Brokaw said that the Zou and Ma publishers “specialized” in the manufacture of cheap text. Here, she gives us a convincingly detailed view. At the same time, this reviewer at times thought that Brokaw’s penchant for being inclusive about the characterization of the readership for these texts might carry with it the risk of over-emphasizing the role of “highly literate” readers. I am of the opinion that the overwhelming majority of readers sought by these bookstores as potential consumers were simply “literate”, without any special training.

The book concludes with Chapter 14, “The Diffusion of Print Culture in Qing China”. In order to understand further the Sibao’s position in the bookmaking world, Brokaw here introduces other commercial publishing sites: Xuwanzhen in Jiangxi, and Yuechi in Sichuan. She finds that these other sites share similar characteristics with Sibao, and thus is able to confirm a broader and deeper circulation of texts and related information throughout southern China during the Qing.

The above is a brief introduction to the book’s contents. Again, I think Brokaw’s aims in this book have been well accomplished. In the remainder of this article, I would like to make note of several of Brokaw’s ideas I found particularly inspiring. One interesting point about Sibao is that the book trade there started at the beginning of the Qing Dynasty. Important questions remain about the continuities and discontinuities of book

culture between the late Ming and the Qing periods. It is known that a (chiefly commercial) publishing boom occurred in the late Ming period.⁷ When we go to libraries, a great proportion of books seen there published in the Qing are house editions, the contents of which were academic. Books published in the Qing held in libraries were mostly scholarly books, likely because these were the books deemed most worthy of preservation. Nevertheless, the Qing-era readership was quite large; among them were scholarly readers and basic readers. Scholarly readers were located at the top of the social pyramid, and were comparatively few; basic readers were located at the base of the pyramid, and were high in number. From the point of view of one person's process of learning how to read, children did not necessarily read high-level works, but at the beginning of their learning process, they did use textbooks such as *San zi jing*, *Four Books* and so on. So it can be said that everyone – regardless of their future profile as readers – needed these kinds of basic books. Who supplied such books? That is the question that Brokaw has solved in her study.

In Japan's Edo period, the *Four Books* were needed for students of every local clan (*han*) school established by *daimyo*, the feudal lord. These schools preserved woodblocks of the *Four Books* and printed them for students every three or four years. Because of the great demand, nearly all clan schools seemed to have their own woodblocks of *Four Books*. In other words, the circulation of the *Four Books* was independent of the large bookstores in Edo or Kyoto that published books and circulated them nationally. Scholarly works, on the other hand, fell under the purview of these major bookstores, which could circulate them nationally.

So it seems that there were different levels of book circulation: scholarly books circulated nationally, and basic books circulated comparatively locally, a phenomenon applicable to both Edo Japan and Qing China. Brokaw's study has demonstrated that the sphere of circulation of books published in Sibao extended to Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, Hubei, and Hunan. What then was the situation of the basic books in the Jiangnan area, or in northern and western China? Obviously people there also needed these kinds of books. In Jiangnan there must have been bookstores that, like Sibao bookstores, mainly published basic books, because demand for textbooks, ostensibly, is universal. I suppose that during the Qing dynasty there must have existed two different levels of bookstores in the Jiangnan also: scholarly bookstores (though it should be noted that in Jiangnan wealthy people sometimes published books themselves, in house editions), and low- or basic-level bookstores like those in Sibao. Bookstores resembling Sibao bookstores surely existed in the big cities of Jiangnan such as Suzhou and Nanjing. Extrapolated further, there must have been many Sibao-like publishing centers in China, some of which Brokaw has introduced in this study. I have a copy of the textbook for civil service examinations in the late Qing, *Xiaoti zhenghu* 小題正鵠 *The Exact Target for the Question of the Examinations*. Brokaw mentions the Sibao edition of this text; mine was published in Tianjin. In other words, the same textbook was published in both Sibao and Tianjin; one in the south and one in the north. It may be that the Sibao edition circulated in south China and the Tianjin edition in north China, suggesting that, in China, there were many Sibaos.

7 I have discussed this phenomenon in Oki Yasushi 大木康, *Minmatsu Kōnan no shuppan bunka* 明末江南の出版文化 (*Publishing Culture in Late Ming Jiangnan*), Tokyo: Kenbun Shuppan, 2004.

This point leads me to another question, the differences between the nature of the late Ming publisher and that of the Qing. As an example, I would like to note the publication of a textbook for civil service examinations. In the late Ming period, a great number of textbooks for these examinations were published. The way late Ming textbooks of Classics for civil service examinations are listed in a Chinese book catalogue such as that of the Japanese *Naikaku bunko* 內閣文庫 shows the situation clearly. The first thing we notice is a wide array of textbooks of a very similar nature. The second is that the titles and subtitles of these works often contained some sort of gesture of self-promotion, an appeal meant to distinguish them from the competition, for example, 新鏤吳先生精傳 書經萬世法程註 (*Newly Published, Handed Down by Master Wu: Annotations and Eternal Principles of Shujing*). Competition among bookstores in the late Ming thus appears to have been quite fierce. Needless to say people during the Qing also needed this kind of textbook, but the variety of texts was quite poor. The above-mentioned *Xiaoti zhenghu* is but one example of the same textbook being published in several different places. The situation in the Qing differs from the late Ming. The character of the late Ming publishing is *variety*; that of the Qing is a bit monotonous.

Publishers in the late Ming typically released a broad spectrum of books. In *The Peach Blossom Fan*, a play written by Kong Shangren 孔尚任, a master of bookstore in Nanjing speaks in the following way:

Ts'ai [sings]:

In my shop, like the famous caves of Yu-shan,
A myriad precious volumes are assembled;
My labours as a collector have won for me
Both learned reputation and hard cash.
A scholar-merchant, I, who only hope
To avoid any book-burning First Emperor of Ch'in!

[speaks]: Nanking ranks first among cities for the wealth of its books, and most of these are in Three Mountain Street, where I keep the largest bookshop
[points]: Here are the Thirteen Canons, the twenty-one Dynastic Histories, all the tomes of the nine schools of philosophy, of the three religions and the hundred thinkers, besides collections of eight-legged essays and fashionable modern novels. I have traveled north and south to gather this collection, minutely examining old editions to make fine reprints with scholarly annotations. As well as earning a handsome profit by these transactions, I have helped to preserve and circulate the noblest thoughts of mankind. Even the doctors and masters of literature greet me with deference. I have reason to be satisfied with my reputation.⁸

This bookstore of Mr Cai's sold various kinds of books; scholarly books such as the Thirteen Canons, the twenty-one Dynastic Histories, and comparatively popular books such as collections of eight-legged essays and fashionable modern novels. The publications of

8 *The Peach Blossom Fan*, translated by Chen Shih-hsiang and Harold Acton with the collaboration of Cyril Birch, Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1976, p. 212.

booksellers in the late Ming Jiangnan had rich variety. The book catalogue *Mingdai banke zonglu* exhibits the variety that characterizes late Ming publishers; for example, the publisher Wenlinge 文林閣 in Nanjing (seen in *Mingdai banke zonglu*, *juan 1*) mainly published plays such as *Hong fu ji* 紅拂記, or *Huanhunji* 還魂記. But it also published *Huang Ming zoushu* 皇明奏疏, a collection of addresses to the Emperor, and *Song chao wenjian* 宋朝文鑑, a collection of prose of the Song Dynasty. Also, we know that a similar variety of books was published by Yu Xiangdou, a famous publisher in Jianyang, Fujian. The range of publications covered scholarly books and basic books. In contrast, almost all the books published by Sibao bookstores were basic. Thus the difference between the late Ming and the Qing is the increased specialization of scholarly and basic bookstores. In the Qing a certain diffusion of print culture was realized, just as Brokaw concludes. These Zou and Ma family bookstores were typical of Qing basic publishers.

Brokaw's book is required reading on Chinese book culture primarily because it supplies us with information on publishers and booksellers about whom we had previously known quite little. It also is quite important that the sources for this study were gathered through field research. Relevant books and documents are not always preserved in libraries – sometimes local people possess them. In Sibao, Brokaw observed the remains of bookstores and interviewed descendants of the Zou and Ma families who once had managed bookstores. For a long time, scholars were unable to conduct field research in mainland China. This book is an achievement of a new age in which foreign scholars can access information even in a remote village in a mountainous area. Still, field research in China is no cakewalk. We can easily imagine that the author encountered many difficulties at the research site, but was able to overcome them. In conclusion, I would like to celebrate again the publication of her wonderful research. Professor Brokaw has achieved her goals admirably.