

A Review of the Research on “Book Publishing in the Song Dynasty” Over the Past Three Decades*

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The main achievements in the study of Song Dynasty book publishing over the past three decades encompass four major themes: publishing achievements and contributing factors, collation and research of historical publishing materials, publishing activities, and the publishing system. Scholars have analyzed the reasons for the prosperity of book carving, block-printing, and compilation in the Song Dynasty from perspectives such as political policies, economic foundations, and human resources. The collation of historical publishing materials primarily involves chronological records and textual research, laying a solid foundation for subsequent studies. Research on publishing activities focuses on unique cultural phenomena like the “Sunning the Books Gathering” and book collection campaigns, reconstructing the social context of Song Dynasty publishing. Studies on the publishing system comprehensively explore publishing entities, distribution channels, publishing management, and copyright protection. Among these, in-depth analyses of the formation of copyright concepts, protective norms, and mechanisms for governing infringement are particularly notable, revealing the overall development and intrinsic characteristics of the Song Dynasty book publishing industry. These studies collectively demonstrate the distinctive features of the Song Dynasty as a golden age of ancient Chinese publishing.

Keywords: Song Dynasty, books, publishing

Preface

The Song Dynasty represents a golden age in the development of ancient Chinese book publishing. Influenced by the national policy of “promoting culture while restraining military force”, woodblock printing technology became widespread. The three major systems of official, private, and commercial engraving stood side-by-side, producing a vast number of books with meticulous collation. This not only established the classical textual paradigms for later generations but also laid the fundamental pattern of Chinese book culture. Over the past two decades, with the deepening of research in publishing history, book history, and bibliography, Song Dynasty book publishing has gradually become a focal point in academia. Related achievements have continuously emerged in areas such as publishing accomplishments, historical publishing materials, publishing activities, and

* This paper is the periodic research result of the research project: “Scientific Research Project—Publishing and Media Special Project” of Guangxi Humanities and Social Sciences Development Research Center: Research on the Compilation, Engraving, and Publishing of Song Dynasty Literati Collections Collected in the Seikado Bunko Library, Japan (广西人文社会科学发展研究中心“科学研究工程·出版传媒专项项目”——日本静嘉堂文库所藏宋人集部典籍的编纂、刊刻与出版研究, Serial number: CBCMB2025003).

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the publishing system. These studies reveal the causes and characteristics of the prosperity of the Song book industry at a macro level, while also reconstructing specific historical scenes such as the “Sunning the Books Gathering”, copyright protection, and piracy governance at a micro level, greatly enriching our understanding of knowledge dissemination and book production mechanisms in the Song Dynasty. Therefore, this paper aims to review and comment on representative works from the past three decades, hoping to provide reference for future research.

Publishing Achievements and Contributing Factors

Liu Dunyu (1999) argues that the engraving, collection, circulation, utilization, collation, and compilation of books in the Song Dynasty were unprecedentedly developed. The main reasons for this flourishing situation are threefold: First, the relatively enlightened cultural policies of the Song rulers provided political guarantees. Second, the enhanced status and quality of personnel engaged in book-related endeavors provided a significant impetus. Third, the prosperous feudal economy provided the material foundation.

Cao Zhi (1999) points out that the Song Dynasty was an important period for ancient book compilation. He discusses the achievements of Song book compilation from the perspectives of official projects, private writings, book content, compilation forms, and compilation theories and methods, while also analyzing the reasons for these achievements.

Collation and Research of Historical Publishing Materials

The journal *The Documentation* serialized Li Zhizhong’s (2004) article “Chronicle of Book Compilation and Publishing in the Song Dynasty” in six installments from 2003 to 2005. Li meticulously categorizes, records, and chronicles books compiled and published during the Southern Song Dynasty. Liu Jinrong (2006) provides a detailed analysis of Li’s work, pointing out certain errors that require careful examination and differentiation. I believe that such timely analysis of issues arising during the collation of documentary materials is beneficial for the organization of historical publishing materials and subsequent research on Song Dynasty book publishing.

Publishing Activities

Fang Jianxin (2005) focuses on the methods of book preservation in ancient China, noting that the practice of “sunning books in summer and autumn to prevent insect damage and mold” emerged very early in China. After the Han Dynasty, a seasonal custom of sunning clothes and books on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month developed. By the Song Dynasty, this gradually evolved into an annual organized “Sunning the Books Gathering” derived from officials visiting the imperial libraries. Officials would sun books in summer, and the government would provide them with funds for food and drink. Officials such as remonstrance officials, censors, and officials above the rank of Daizhi would participate, transforming it into a cultural event resembling a book exhibition. This was a pioneering initiative in the history of ancient Chinese book collecting and culture, reflecting the profound cultural atmosphere of Song society from one aspect.

Qi Chenyun (2007) discusses the methods of book collection, preservation practices, and their underlying reasons in the Song Dynasty. The author argues that the Song government repeatedly issued edicts and orders seeking books, purchasing them nationwide. Records of the Song government’s book collection campaigns are abundant in the Song Huiyao Jigao—Chongru (Compendium of Song Institutional History—Respecting Confucianism).

Publishing System

Chen Yi and Wang Haigang (2008) state that the Song Dynasty was the golden age of ancient Chinese book publishing. The total number of books published in the Song Dynasty roughly equaled half of all books published throughout previous dynasties combined. The authors discuss from a macro perspective the main entities of publishing during this period, distribution channels (fixed shops, itinerant booksellers, market trade), types of books published (elementary readers, school textbooks, examination aids, illustrated books), book prices (ranging from covering only production costs to price inflation), book publicity and promotion (sales catalogues, promotional colophons attached to books), and various aspects of publishing management (banning astronomical charts and prophecies, yin-yang divination, and heretical texts; prohibiting private printing and sale of books concerning military border intelligence; forbidding private printing and sale of collections by Su Shi, Huang Tingjian, and others). This provides a relatively complete picture of the Song Dynasty book publishing system.

Tian Jianping (2010) argues that the emergence of copyright issues in the Song Dynasty resulted from the comprehensive development of factors such as Song society's politics, economy, culture, legal system, technology, and book production. The Song Dynasty witnessed the emergence of relatively significant copyright concepts and relatively formed legal norms for copyright protection in ancient Chinese book production and dissemination. Book authors and producers truly began to realize copyright consciousness. The Song policy of “governing the country through culture” generally created a very tolerant publishing environment for book production. It should be noted that while the Song government did not enact specific publishing laws, it began to utilize state power, laws, and non-governmental mediation to address piracy. From the government to the populace, general concepts regarding copyright protection had become widespread. The statement “Applied to the authorities, permission denied for others to print and carve” printed on books published by the “Cheng Family Bookstore” in Meishan is a classic example of copyright protection. The Song Dynasty had already formed a series of copyright protection procedures, encompassing concepts of copyright and its protection, legal appeals, adjudication according to law, judgment and execution, and even non-governmental mediation.

Yuan Lin (2011) uses the concept of copyright protection in the Song Dynasty as an example to elucidate the underlying value concepts. These include: first, government administration preceding commercial activity; second, emphasis on trustworthiness; third, reputation placed before profit; fourth, integrity placed before profit. The author believes that these concepts, though differing in their starting points and focuses, have all had a profound impact on Chinese publishing history and merit understanding and study by later generations.

Liu Daming (2018) emphasizes the need for an objective view of the prosperity exhibited by the book publishing industry in the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties, suggesting it might represent a kind of false prosperity. The reason lies in the increasingly rampant illegal activities related to book publishing during the Song Dynasty. In response, the Song government, primarily aiming to maintain its autocratic rule, strengthened the prevention and control of infringing activities in the field of book publishing and dissemination. The government simultaneously mobilized various forces and employed diverse methods to establish multi-level political censorship thresholds, implementing pre-censorship, post-publication censorship, and information feedback systems concurrently. The government also utilized methods such as rewarding whistleblowers and punishing violators, forming a distinctive governance mechanism for book publishing.

Conclusion

In summary, the core research achievements in the field of Song Dynasty book publishing over the past three decades primarily involve four major themes: publishing achievements and contributing factors, collation and research of historical publishing materials, publishing activities, and the publishing system. Scholars have mostly explored the reasons for the achievements in Song book engraving and compilation from perspectives such as political policies, economic foundations, and human resources. The collation of historical Song publishing materials focuses on chronological records and textual research; related critical work has consolidated the material foundation for subsequent studies. In research on publishing activities, scholars have conducted textual research on unique Song practices like the “Sunning the Books Gathering” and book collection campaigns, reconstructing the social and cultural scenes of Song book publishing. Research on the Song Dynasty publishing system represents a focal point in academia, covering the entire chain including publishing entities, distribution channels, and publishing management. Among these, studies on copyright protection and piracy governance are particularly in-depth. Scholars have not only clarified the formation of copyright concepts and the development of protective norms in the Song Dynasty but have also conducted multi-dimensional analyses of the mechanisms for governing infringement in the Song book publishing industry, revealing the overall development and intrinsic characteristics of the Song Dynasty book publishing industry.

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